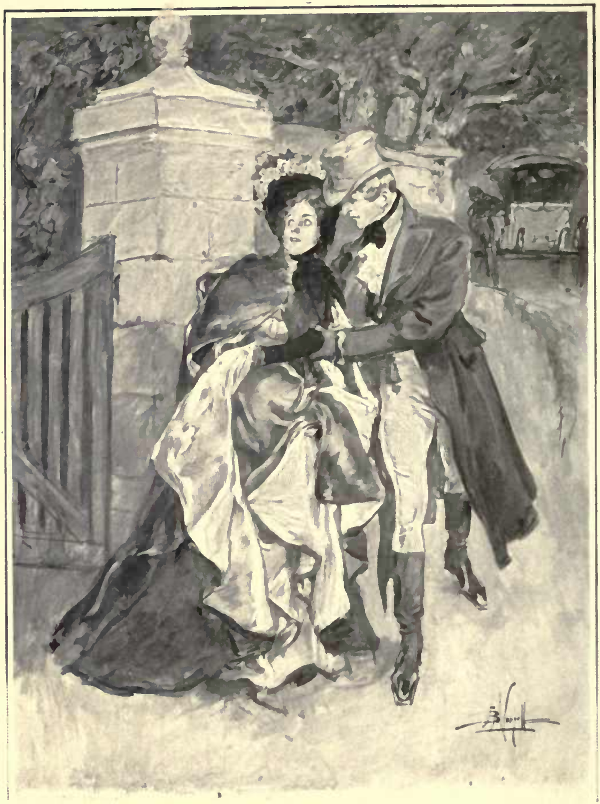
CHILDREN OF DESTINY

MOLLY ELLIOT SEAWELL



A CERTAIN QUALITY OF ATTRACTION ABOUT BLAIR WHICH MADE WOMEN LOVE HIM.—*Page 22*

Children of Destiny

By MOLLY ELLIOT SEAWELL

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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CHAPTER I.

THE hot June sunshine poured down upon the great fields of yellow wheat at Deerchase, and the velvet wind swept softly over them, making long billows and shadowy dimples in the golden sea of grain. The air was all blue and gold, and vibrating with the music of harvest time—the reedlike harmonies of the wind-swept wheat, the droning of many bees, the merry drumming of the cicada in the long grass, and, above all, the song of the black reapers, as they swung their glittering scythes in the morning sun. One side of the vast field was skirted by purplish woods, through which went constantly a solemn murmur—the only sad note in the symphony. On the other side rose great clumps and groves of live oaks and silver beeches and feathery elms, shading a spacious brick house with innumerable peaks and gables. Beyond this house and its pleasure grounds a broad and glittering river went merrily on its way to the south Atlantic. Nature in this coast country of Virginia is prodigal of beauty, and bestows all manner of charms with a lavish hand. Here are found blue rivers and bluer skies, and pale splendours of moonlit nights and exquisite dawns and fair noons. Here Nature runs the whole gamut of beauty—through the laughing loveliness of spring mornings, the capricious sweetness of summer days, when the landscape hides itself, like a sulky beauty, in white mists and silvery rains, to the cold glory of the winter nights; there is no discord nor anything unlovely. But in the harvest time it is most gracious and love-compelling. There is something ineffably gay in harvest, and the negroes, those children of the sun, sang as merrily and as naturally as the grasshoppers that chirped in the green heart of the woods.

The long row of black reapers swung their scythes in rhythm, their voices rising and falling in cadence with the cutting of the wheat. The head man led the singing as he led the reapers. After them came a crowd of negro women, gathering up the wheat and tying it into bundles—it was as primitive as the harvesting in the days of Ruth and Boaz. It was not work, it was rather play. The song of the reapers had an accompaniment of shrill laughter from the women, who occasionally joined in the singing—

"When I was young, I useter to wait
Behine ole marster, han' he plate,
An' pass de bottle when he dry,
An' bresh away dat blue-tail fly."

The men's voices rolled this out sonorously and melodiously. Then came the chorus, in which the high sweet voices of the women soared like the larks and the thrushes:

"Jim, crack corn, I doan' keer,
Jim, crack corn, I doan' keer,
Jim, crack corn, I doan' keer.
Ole—marster's—gone—away!"

The last line was a wail; but the first lines were full of a devil-may-care music, which made some of the women drop their bundles of wheat, and, picking up their striped cotton skirts, they danced a break-down nimbly. A dozen little negro boys carried buckets of water about the field to refresh the thirsty harvesters, and one negro girl, with her arms folded and a great pail on her head of whisky and water with mint floating around in it, was vociferously greeted whenever she appeared, and a drink from the gourd in the pail invariably caused a fresh outburst of song.

Hot and bright as the fields were, it was not too hot and bright for these merry labourers. But there was a stretch of coolness and of shade on the edge of the woods where the dew still sparkled upon the blackberry-bushes and the grass and undergrowth. And in a shady place under a hawthorn bush sat a black-eyed little boy with a dog across his knees. They had for company a Latin book, which the boy made a lazy pretence of studying, wearing all the time a sulky scowl. But when he found that he could put the book to a better use than studying, by propping the dog's head upon it so as to bring the tawny, intelligent eyes upon a level with his own, the scowl cleared away. His face, then, though full of archness and sweetness, was not altogether happy. He gazed into the dog's eyes wistfully, for, although many people gazed upon him kindly, no creature in the wide world ever gazed upon him so affectionately as this one poor brute of a dog.

Presently, while lost in a sort of dream, listening to the song of the reapers as it melted away in the distance, and following up pretty, idle fancies that danced before him like white butterflies in the sun, he heard a crashing behind him of a burly figure making its way through the leaves and grass, and an ungainly man, past middle age, and blear-eyed and snuffy, appeared before him. In the pure, fresh morning light he looked coarser, more dissipated than could be imagined; but when his voice rang out, not even the wood bird's note put it to shame—it was so clear, so rich, so sweet. That voice was the one charm left to him.

"Well, Lewis, my lad," he cried out, "how are you and my old friend Horatius Flaccus getting on this deuced fine morning? Drat the dog—you always have him about."

"You shouldn't drat him, Mr. Bulstrode," answered Lewis, "because old Service likes Latin better than I do. He has scarcely blinked since I put the book in his paw."

"Dogs do like Latin," answered Bulstrode, with a wink; "let me show you, sir."

Lewis burst out laughing at the idea that dogs had any taste for the classics; and the dog, withdrawing his head, showed his teeth in a snarl.

"Snarl away, my friend," said Bulstrode jovially, seating himself, with awkward comfort, on the grass. "I lay I'll make you change your tune. Do you know—" Bulstrode's pronunciation was not equal to the music of his voice, and he said "D'ye know."

"D'ye know, boy, that the two great powers to charm women and dogs are the eye and the voice? Now, as for my eyes—Lord, I never had any charm in 'em, and the life I've led wasn't calculated to give 'em any. But see if that damned dog doesn't stop his growling when I give him some first-class Latin."

Bulstrode took the book and began to read sonorously one of the longer odes. Lewis, whose black eyes were wonderfully expressive, was laughing to himself, the more so when, as Bulstrode rolled out the lines of rhythmic beauty, old Service ceased his growling and appeared to be listening gravely. Bulstrode put out his hand and drew the dog toward him, and in a little while Service was resting his head on Bulstrode's knee and blinking placidly and solemnly into his face.

"There you have it!" cried Bulstrode, slapping the book together. "Let me tell you, Lewis, in the old days, when my face was fresh and fair, I used to walk up and down the river bank at Cambridge, reciting these odes to a gang of undergraduates, and sometimes there'd be a don on the outskirts of the crowd. Don't know what a don is? Well, I'll tell you some day. And the reason my Latin and Greek are so much better than my English is because I learned my English from the vulgar. But my Latin and Greek I learned from the very finest old Latin and Greek gentlemen that ever were—the cream of the company, boy; and that and my voice are about the only decent things left about me."

"And your philosophy," said Lewis, hesitating—"that great book you're helping Mr. Skelton on."

"Philosophy—fudge!" cried Bulstrode carelessly.

"There's Skelton now, shut up in that musty library yonder"—jerking his thumb toward the Deerchase house—"grinding away at his system of philosophy; and here am I, the true philosopher, enjoying this infernally glorious harvest and these picturesque black people, that I never can get used to, no matter how long I live in this odd country. D'ye know what Kant says? Of course you don't; so I'll tell you. He says that two men, like *him* over yonder"—Bulstrode jerked his thumb again over his shoulder—"and your humble servant, engaged in pursuing abstract philosophy, are like two idiots who want a drink of milk; so one milks a post, while the other holds a sieve. That's philosophy, my dear boy."

This puzzled Lewis very much, who was nevertheless accustomed to hearing Bulstrode pooh-poohing philosophy, while Mr. Skelton always uttered the word reverently.

"You see yourself," cried Bulstrode, giving his battered hat a rakish cock, "Skelton is a fine example of what enormous study and research will bring a man to, and I'm another one. He has been studying for twenty years to write the greatest book that ever was written. He's spent the twenty best years of his life, and he's got fifteen thousand books stored away in that grand new library he has built, and he's bought me, body and soul, to help him out, and the result will be—he'll *never* write the book!"

Bulstrode slapped his hand down on his knee as he brought out the "*never*" in a ringing voice; the dog gave a single loud yelp, and Lewis Pryor jumped up in surprise.

"You don't mean it, Mr. Bulstrode!" he cried breathlessly, for he had been bred upon the expectation that a great work was being then written in the Deerchase library by Mr. Skelton, and when it was given to the world the planet would stop revolving for a time at least. Bulstrode had an ungovernable indiscreetness, and, the string of his tongue being loosed, he proceeded to discuss Skelton's affairs with great freedom, and without regarding in the least the youth of his companion.

"Yes, I do mean it. Skelton's milking the post, and he's hired me to hold the sieve. He's been preparing—preparing—preparing to write that book; and the more he prepares, the more he won't write it. Not that Skelton hasn't great powers; you know those things he wrote at the university, particularly that 'Voices of the People'? Well, Skelton's got a bogie after him—the bogie of a too brilliant promise in his youth. He's mortally afraid of the young fellow who wrote 'Voices of the People.' But he'll carry out that other project of his—no doubt at all about *that*."

"What is it?" asked Lewis, full of curiosity, though not altogether comprehending what he heard.

"Oh, that determination of his to ruin Jack Blair and his wife," replied Bulstrode, flapping away a fly. "Mrs. Blair, you know, jilted the Great Panjandrum fifteen years ago, and ran away with Blair; and they'll pay for it with every acre of land and stick of timber they've got in the world!"

Lewis pondered a moment or two.

"But I thought Mr. Skelton and the Blairs were so friendly and polite, and—"

"O Lord, yes. Deuced friendly and polite!

That's the way with gentlefolks—genteel brutality—shaking hands and smiling one at the other, and all the time a knife up the sleeve. Don't understand gentlefolks myself."

This rather shocked Lewis, who was accustomed to hearing everybody he knew called a gentleman, and the title insisted upon tenaciously.

"Why, Mr. Bulstrode," he said diffidently, "ain't you a gentleman?"

"Lord bless you, no!" cried Bulstrode loudly and frankly. "My father kept a mews, and my mother—God bless her!—I'll say no more. But look you, Lewis Pryor," said he, rising, and with a sort of rude dignity, "though I be not a gentleman *here*," slapping his body, "I'm a gentleman *here*," tapping his forehead. "I'm an aristocrat from my chops upward."

Lewis had risen too. He thought this was very queer talk, but he did not laugh at it, or feel contempt for Bulstrode, who had straightened himself up, and had actually lost something of his plebeian aspect.

"And," he added with an ill-suppressed chuckle, "I'm a gentleman when I'm drunk. You see, as long as I'm sober I remember the mews, and my father in his black weepers driving the hearse, and the delight I used to feel when the young sprigs of the nobility and gentry at the university would ask me to their wine parties to hear me spout Ovid and Anacreon, for *they* knew I wasn't a gentleman. But when I'm drunk, I only remember that I was a 'double first'; that every Greek and Latinist in England knows Wat Bulstrode's name; and when this precious philosopher Skelton was scouring the universities to find a man to help him out with his—ha! ha!—*great work*, he could not for love or money get any better man than ragged, drunken, out-at-elbows Wat Bulstrode. I tell you, boy, when I'm drunk I'm a king! I'm more—I'm a gentleman! There is something in Greek which provokes an intolerable thirst. You say that Latin is dry; so it is, so it is, my boy—very dry and musty!" and then Bulstrode, in a rich, sweet, rollicking voice, as delicious as his speaking voice, trolled out the fag end of a song that echoed and re-echoed through the green woods:

"I went to Strasburg, when I got drunk,
With the most learned Professor Brunck.
I went to Wortz, where I got more drunken,
With the more learned Professor Bruncken."

Bulstrode had quite forgotten the boy's presence. Lewis gazed at him with wide, innocent boyish eyes. It was rather a tipsy age, and to be a little convivial was considered a mark of a liberal spirit, but Lewis was astute enough to see that this was not the sort of gentlemanly joviality which prevailed in the age and in the country. The song of the reapers was still mellowly heard in the distance; their scythe blades glittered in the sun, the merriment, the plenty, the beauty and simplicity of the scene was like Arcady; but the contrast between what Nature had made, and what man had made of himself, in Bulstrode, was appalling.

Suddenly, the careless delight expressed in Bulstrode's look and manner vanished, and a strange passion of despair overcame him.

"But then, there is the waking up—the waking up—great God!" he shouted. "Then I see that I'm, after all, nothing but a worthless dog; that this man Skelton owns me; that I never will be anything but worthless and learned and drunken; that I'm no better than any other hanger-on, for all my Greek and Latin! However," he added, stuffing his hands in his pockets and as suddenly laying aside his tragic air, "there never was such a hanger-on. Upon my soul, it's a question whether Richard Skelton owns Wat Bulstrode, or Wat Bulstrode and the books own Richard Skelton. But look'ee here, boy, I had almost forgot you, and the dog too. I don't envy Richard Skelton. No man pursues his enemy with gaiety of heart. He has spent more money in ruining Jack Blair than would have made ten good men prosperous; and, after all, it's that passion of Blair's for horse racing that will ruin him in the end. Gad! I don't know that I'm any worse than Skelton, or any other man I know.—Why, hello! what the devil—"

This last was involuntarily brought out by Skelton himself, who at that moment stood before him. Lewis had seen Skelton coming, and had vainly tugged at Bulstrode's coat-tails without any effect.

Whether Skelton's philosophy commanded respect or not, his personality certainly did. He was about medium height, lean, dark, and well made. Also, whether he was handsome or not the world had not yet decided during all his forty years of life; but certain it was few men could look handsome beside him. His eyes, though, were singularly black and beautiful, like those of the boy standing by him. He was in riding dress, and held a little whip in his hand; he had ridden out to the harvest field, and then dismounted and left his horse while he walked through the stubble and clover. He had overheard much that Bulstrode had last said, and, in spite of his invincible composure, his face showed a silent rage and displeasure. Bulstrode and Lewis knew it by the sultry gleam of his black eyes. Bulstrode instantly lost his air of independence, and all of his efforts to retain it only resulted in a half-cowed swagger.

"Bulstrode," said Skelton in a cool voice, "how often have I recommended you not to discuss me or my affairs?"

"Don't know, I'm sure," blustered Bulstrode, his hands still in his pockets. Both of them had realised the boy's presence. As Bulstrode really loved him, he hated to be cowed before Lewis. The boy was looking downwards, his eyes on the ground; the dog nestled close to him. Both Skelton and Bulstrode remained silent for a moment or two.

"You know," said Skelton after a pause, "I am not a man to threaten."

"Yes, by Jove, I do," answered Bulstrode, breaking into a complaining whine. "I don't know why it is, Skelton, that you can always bully me; unless it's because you're a gentleman, and I ain't. You dashed patricians always have us plebes under the hack—always, always. The fellows that went ahorseback were always better than those who went afootback. Sometimes, by George, I wish I had been born a gentleman!"

Bulstrode's collapse was so rapid and complete that wrath could not hold against him. Skelton merely said something about an unbridled tongue being a firebrand, and then, turning to Lewis, said:

"The harvest is the black man's holiday. Come with me, and we will see him enjoy it."

Skelton's tone to Lewis was peculiar; although his words were cold, and his manner reserved, his voice expressed a strange fondness. Lewis felt sorry for Bulstrode, standing alone and ashamed, and after he had gone a little way by Skelton's side he turned back and ran toward Bulstrode, holding out his book.

"Won't you have my Horace for company, Mr. Bulstrode?" he cried; "though I believe you know every word in it. But a book is company—when one can't get a dog, that is."

"Yes, boy," answered Bulstrode, taking one hand out of his pocket. "Old Horace and I will forget this workaday world. We have had a good many bouts in our time, Horatius Flaccus and I. The old fellow was a good judge of wine. Pity he didn't know anything about tobacco." He began speaking with a sigh, and ended with a grin.

Skelton and Lewis turned off together, and walked along the edge of the field. The fresh, sweet scent of the newly cut wheat filled the air; the clover blossoms that grew with the wheat harboured a cloud of happy bees; over the land hung a soft haze. Lewis drank in delightedly all of the languid beauty of the scene, and so did Skelton in his quiet, controlled way.

Lewis shrewdly suspected that the reason Skelton carried him off was to get him out of Bulstrode's way, for although Bulstrode was nominally his tutor, and had plenty of opportunities for talking, he was not always as communicative as on that morning. The boy was much in awe of Skelton. He could not altogether make out his own feelings in the matter. He knew of no relationship between them, and thought he knew he was the son of Thomas Pryor, in his lifetime a tutor of Skelton's. He called Skelton "Mr. Skelton," and never remembered to have had a caress from him in all his life. But he never looked into Skelton's eyes, which were precisely like his own, that he did not feel as if some strong and secret bond united them.

Meanwhile, Bulstrode stood in his careless attitude, looking after them, his eyes fixed on Skelton's straight, well set-up figure.

"There you go," he apostrophised. "Most men think they could advise the Almighty; but you, Richard Skelton, think yourself *the* Lord Almighty Himself! Unbridled tongue, indeed! I lay odds that I'll make you write that sixth section of your Introduction over again before this day is out. I know a weak spot in your theory that knocks that chapter into flinders, and I've been saving it up for just such an occasion as this. But go your way, and I'll go mine."

"Fair and free is the king's highway!"

he sang, loudly and sweetly.

CHAPTER II.

It is impossible for anything in this tame, latter-day age to be compared with the marvels of fifty, sixty, seventy years ago. The worn-out, tired race declines to be awed, or delighted, or startled any more. "Old Wonder is dead." People have lost the sense of admiration. It is the price paid for civilisation.

But it was not always so. Fifty years ago the romantic, the interesting, even the mysterious, still existed. Luxury was rare, and life was so hard and poor to most people on this continent that imagination had to be called in to make it even tolerable. Superlatives had not gone out of fashion, and therefore it is quite just to apply the words grand, magnificent, superb, to Deerchase. True, if that deadly enemy of superlatives, comparison, be levelled against it, there is no doubt the irreverent modern would smile; for what the fresh, wonder-loving people in 1820 thought ineffably splendid, the jaded, sated people of 19— would think cheap, tawdry, not worth speaking of, after all. So that the pictures in the main hall at Deerchase would be pronounced mediocre, the park rather ambitious than imposing, the stables and the establishment generally insignificant compared with those of the merchant princes of today. But the owner of Deerchase had this immense advantage over the rich people of to-day—not the whole possessions of all of them could command half the awe, delight, and distinction that Deerchase did in its time. And if the power of places to awe and delight be gone, what shall be said of the lost power of individuals? But in 1820 hero worship survived with many other beautiful and imaginative things that the world has outgrown; and Richard Skelton, Esquire, was an object of envy and admiration to the whole county, and to half the State of Virginia besides.

For Richard Skelton, Esquire, was certainly born with a golden, not a silver, spoon in his mouth. In his childhood his dark beauty and a certain proud, disdainful air, natural to him, made him look like a little prince. In those days Byron was the poet; and the boy, with his great fortune, his beauty, his orphanhood, his precocious wit and melancholy, was called a young Lara. As he grew older, there were indications in him of strange mental powers, and a cool and determined will that was perfectly unbreakable. He brooded his youth away (in these degenerate days it would be said he loafed) sadly and darkly in the library at Deerchase. Old Tom Shapleigh, his guardian, who feared neither man nor devil, and who was himself a person of no mean powers, always felt, when his ward's dark, inscrutable eyes were fixed upon him, a ridiculous and awkward inferiority—the more ridiculous and awkward because old Tom really had accomplished a good deal in life, while Richard Skelton could not possibly have accomplished anything at the very early age when he was perfectly commanding, not to say patronising, to his guardian. Old Tom did not take charge of the great Skelton property and the strange Skelton boy for pure love. The profits of managing such a property were considerable, and he was the very best manager of land and negroes in all the region about. But the Skelton boy, from the time he was out of round jackets, always assumed an air toward his guardian as if the guardian were merely his agent. This gave old Tom much saturnine amusement, for he was one of those men whose sense of humour was so sharp that he could smile over his own discomfiture at the hands of a haughty stripling, and could even laugh grimly at the burden of a silly wife, which he had taken upon himself.

For those who like life with a good strong flavour to it, Skelton and old Tom Shapleigh, and the people around them, were not devoid of interest. They belonged to a sturdy, well-fed, hard riding, hard drinking, landed aristocracy that was as much rooted to the land as the great oaks that towered in the virgin woods. All landowners are more or less bound to the soil; but these people were peculiarly so, because they had no outside world. There was no great city on this side of the Atlantic Ocean, and their journeys were merely a slight enlargement of their orbit. Their idea of seeing the world was a trip in the family coach to the Springs, where they met exactly the same people, bearing the same names, that they had left at home. This fixity and monotony produced in them an intensity of provincialism, a strength of prejudice, hardly to be conceived of now. They were only a few generations removed from an English ancestry, which in this new land prayed daily, "God bless England, our sweet native country!" Feudalism, in the form of a mild and patriarchal slave system, was still strong with them when it had gone to decay in Europe. The brighter sun had warmed their blood somewhat; they were more fiery and more wary than their forefathers. They were arrogant, yet simple-minded, and loved power more than money. They also loved learning, after their fashion, and kept the roster full at William and Mary College. But their learning was used to perpetuate their political power. By means of putting all their men of parts into politics, they managed to wage successfully an unequal fight for power during many generations. The same kind of equality existed among them as among the Spanish grandees, who call each other by their nicknames as freely as peasants, but are careful to give an outsider all his titles and dignities. There was a vast deal of tinsel in their cloth of gold; their luxuries were shabbily pieced out, and they were not quite as grand as they fancied themselves. But, after all, there is something imposing in a system which gives a man his own land, his house built of his own timber, his bricks made of his own red clay, his servants clothed and shod by his own workmen, his own blacksmiths, wheelwrights, carpenters, shoemakers—in short, a little kingdom of which he is the sovereign. Naturally it makes him arrogant, but it also makes him independent; and where each man stands upon punctilio everybody is likely to be polite. So they had few quarrels, but such as they had were deadly. The hair-splitting, the subtleties of the *fin du siècle* were unknown, undreamed of, by them. Everything was simple and direct—love, hate, fear, remorse, and joy. God and the devil were close to every man. Their lives were fixed, and had the continuity of an epic, instead of the fragmentary, disjointed lives that the people of to-day are living. And as they were necessarily obliged to spend all their mortal days together, they knew each other and each other's generations like a book, and this effectually estopped pretension of all sorts. It was a picturesque, gay, pleasure-loving life, its Arcadian simplicity sometimes interrupted by tragedies, but it only lasted until the railroad and the telegraph brought all the world within speaking distance.

The rivers, broad and shallow and salt, that made in from the ocean bays, were the spots wisely chosen for the homesteads. The plantations extended back into a slightly rolling country, but every "p'int," as the negroes called it, was the site for a house. At Deerchase, from the long stone porch covered with climbing tea roses, which faced the shining river, half a dozen rambling brick houses on their respective "p'ints" could be seen. The farthest off was only a mile up the river as the crow flies, but the indentations of the stream made it more, and when one undertook to go by land, the multitude of gates to be opened between different properties and the various windings and turnings to get there at all made it seem a dozen miles at least. This last place was Newington, where Mr. and Mrs. Jack Blair lived, and which Bulstrode so freely predicted would be in the market soon on account of a grudge owed the Blairs by the Great Panjandrum—Richard Skelton, Esquire. The next place to Deerchase was Belfield, where old Tom Shapleigh and that wonderful woman, Mrs. Shapleigh, lived with their daughter Sylvia, who had inherited more than her father's brains and less than her mother's beauty. Only a shallow creek, running into a marsh, divided Deerchase and Belfield, and it was not twenty minutes' walk from one house to the other. This nearness had been very convenient to old Tom in managing the Skelton property, but it had not conduced to any intimacy between guardian and ward. Richard Skelton was not much above Mr. Shapleigh's shoulder when he took to asking to be excused when his guardian called. Old Tom resented this impertinence as an impetuous, full-blooded, middle-aged gentleman might be expected to. He stormed up and down the Deerchase hall, nearly frightened Bob Skinny, the black butler, into fits, blazed away at the tutor, who would go and plead with the boy through the keyhole of a locked door.

"My dear Richard, come out and see your guardian; Mr. Shapleigh particularly wants to see you."

"And I particularly don't want to see Mr. Shapleigh; so go away and leave me," young Skelton would answer in his smooth, soft voice.

As there was nothing for old Tom to do unless he kicked the door down, he would go home fuming, and have to content himself with writing very fierce and ungrammatical letters, of which the spelling was reckless, but the meaning plain, to his ward, which were never answered. Then old Tom would begin to laugh—it was so comical—and the next time he met the boy there would be that same haughty reserve on Skelton's part, at which his guardian did not know whether to be most angry or amused. He was philosophic under it, though, and would say:

"Look at the tutors I've got for him, begad! and every man-jack of them has been under the hack of that determined little beggar from the start. And when a man, woman, or child can get the upper hand of one who lives in daily, hourly contact, why, you might just as well let 'em go their own gait. Damme, *I* can't do anything with the arrogant little upstart!"

No expense was spared in tutors, and, as each successive one had a horse to ride and a servant to wait on him, and was treated politely by young Skelton as long as he was let alone, the tutors never complained, and old Tom was quite in the dark as to his ward's real acquirements. Mrs. Shapleigh frequently urged Mr. Shapleigh to go over to Deerchase and demand categorically of Richard Skelton exactly how much Latin and mathematics he knew, but old Tom had tried that caper unsuccessfully several times. He did find out, though—or rather Mrs. Shapleigh found out for him—that Skelton had fallen desperately in love with his cousin, Elizabeth Armistead, who was as poor as a church mouse; and, although Elizabeth was known to have a weakness for Jack Blair, her whole family got after her and bullied her into engaging herself to the handsome stripling at Deerchase. Skelton was then twenty. Elizabeth herself was only seventeen, but seventeen was considered quite old in those days. This affair annoyed Mrs. Shapleigh very much, whose daughter Sylvia, being about ten years old at the time, she looked forward to seeing established as mistress of Deerchase by the time she was eighteen.

"Mr. Shapleigh," his better half complained, "why don't you go over to Deerchase and tell Richard Skelton up and down, that if he has fallen in love with Elizabeth Armistead he has got to fall out again?"

"My love, if I wanted him to fall out of love I'd let him get married. There's no such specific for love as matrimony, madam."

"It is not, indeed, Mr. Shapleigh," answered madam, who, though weak in logic was not deficient in spirit, "and I'm sure that's what my poor dear mother used to tell me when I thought I was in love with you. But just look at those Armisteads! Not a penny among them scarcely, and plotting and planning ever since Richard Skelton was born to get him for Elizabeth!"

"Gadzooks, ma'am, in that case the Armisteads are too clever for all of us, because they must have been planning the match at least three years before Elizabeth was born."

"Now, Mr. Shapleigh, how silly you talk! Of course they couldn't have planned it before Elizabeth was born. But it does seem a hard case that Richard Skelton should be carried off right under our noses, and Sylvia here quite ten years old, and I with my heart set on seeing her Mrs. Skelton, of Deerchase. But those Armisteads are a designing pack. You may take my word for it."

"I do, my life, I do," cried old Tom with a wink. Meanwhile there was no doubt that young Skelton was indeed violently in love with his cousin Elizabeth. It was his first passion, and he pursued it with an indescribable fierceness. Elizabeth, who had both beauty and spirit, was a little frightened at the intensity of his love and jealousy. She had been engaged to Jack Blair, of Newington, who was accounted a good match and was a gallant, lovable fellow enough, but, dazzled by Skelton's personality and position and money, and beset by her family, she threw her lover over. They had one last interview, when Blair left her weeping and wringing her hands, while he threw himself on his horse and galloped home with a face as black as midnight.

Elizabeth could not quite forget Blair, and Skelton was too subtle not to see it. He lavished contempt on Blair, calling him a great hulking country squire, who cared for nothing but a screeching run after the hounds or a roaring flirtation with a pretty girl. He quite overlooked a certain quality of attraction about Blair which made women love him, children fondle him, and dogs fawn upon him. Skelton waked up to it, though, one fine morning, when he found that Elizabeth and Blair had decamped during the night and were then on their way to North Carolina to be married.

How Skelton took it nobody knew. He shut himself up in the library at Deerchase, and no one dared to come near him except Bob Skinny, who would tiptoe softly to the door once in a while with a tray and something to eat. There was a feeling in the county as if Abingdon Church had suddenly tumbled down, or the river had all at once turned backwards, when it was known that Richard Skelton had been actually and ignominiously jilted. Mrs.

Shapleigh had a good heart, and, in spite of her plans for Sylvia, felt sorry for Skelton.

"Do, Mr. Shapleigh," she pleaded, "go over and see poor Richard Skelton, and tell him there's as good fish in the sea as ever were caught."

"Zounds, madam," answered old Tom, with energy, "I'm no poltroon, but I wouldn't trust myself in the Deerchase library with that message for ten thousand dollars! He'd murder me. You'd be a widow, ma'am, as sure as shooting."

"Well, Mr. Shapleigh, I hope, if I ever am a widow, I shall submit cheerfully to the Lord's will; and I shall have as handsome a monument put up over you as there is in the county."

"And I'll do the same by you, my dear, if you should precede me. I'll have one big enough to put on it the longest epitaph you ever saw; and I'll tell my second wife every day of the virtues of my first."

"Oh, oh, Mr. Shapleigh, why will you start such dreadful subjects!" cried Mrs. Shapleigh, in great distress.

Let it not be supposed that Mr. and Mrs. Shapleigh were not as comfortable as most married couples. Unlike most, though, in thirty years it had not been determined which was the better man. Mrs. Shapleigh had the mighty weapon of silliness, which has won many matrimonial battles. She never knew when she was beaten, and consequently remained unconquered. Old Tom, having married, like the average man, because the woman tickled his fancy, accepted with great good humour the avalanche of daily disgust that he had brought upon himself, and joked over his misfortune, instead of cutting his throat about it.

But as the wind is tempered to the shorn lamb, Mr. Shapleigh was blessed with a slight deafness, which varied according to whether he did or did not want to hear what Mrs. Shapleigh was saying. At particular stages in an argument, or at the mention of certain expenses, he always became as deaf as a post. He did not believe in cures for deafness, and held on to his beloved infirmity like a drowning man to a plank.

Thirty years of bickering rather endeared them to each other, particularly as neither had a bad heart. But old Tom sometimes thought, with a dash of tragedy, that had the visitation of God come upon him in the shape of a foolish daughter, he would have been tempted to cut his throat, after all. Sylvia, however, was far from foolish, and Mr. Shapleigh sometimes felt that Fate had treated him shabbily in making his daughter as much too clever as his wife was too silly.

Mrs. Shapleigh sent for Bob Skinny, that he might describe Skelton's sufferings to her. Bob, who considered the master of Deerchase the first person in the universe, and the butler of Deerchase the second, gloried, after the manner of his race, in the magnitude of everything—even their misfortunes—that befell the Skeltons.

"Miss Belindy, Mr. Skelton"—this was an innovation in title; but Bob Skinny considered Skelton much too grand to be spoken of simply as "Marse Richard"—"Mr. Skelton he is de mos' distrusted you ever see. He ain' eat a mou'full for two weeks lars' Sad'day, an' he ain' sleep a wink for a mont'!"

"La, Bob, he'll be ill if he doesn't eat or sleep."

"De Skeltons dey kin go' dout eatin' an' sleepin' more'n common ev'yday folks," responded Bob, with dignity.

"Maybe," said Mrs. Shapleigh sympathetically, "a course of tansy tea would cure him if his spirits are so bad; and if he'd put some old nails in a stone jar and pour some water on them, and take it three times a day, it is as good a tonic as he could find. And if he won't go out of the library to take any exercise, if you'd persuade him to swing a flat-iron about in either hand, it would expand his lungs and do for exercise."

None of these suggestions, however, reached young Skelton, shut up in the library, raging like a wild creature.

In a month or two, however, he appeared again, looking exactly as he always had looked, and nobody dared to cast a sympathising glance upon him.

About that time a political pamphlet appeared anonymously. It made a tremendous sensation. It was, for its day, wildly iconoclastic. It pointed out the defects in the social system in Virginia, and predicted, with singular force and clearness, the uprooting of the whole thing unless a change was inaugurated from within. It showed that navigation and transportation were about to be revolutionised by steam, and that, while great material prosperity would result for a time, it meant enormous and cataclysmal changes, which might be destructive or might be made almost recreative.

This pamphlet set the whole State by the ears. On the hustings, in the newspapers, in private and in public, it was eagerly discussed. Even the pulpiteers took a shy at it. The authorship was laid at the door of every eminent man in the State and some outside, and it suddenly came out that it was written by the black-eyed, disappointed boy locked up in the Deerchase library.

The commotion it raised—the storm of blame and praise—might well have turned any head. Its literary excellence was unquestioned. Skelton was considered an infant Junius. But if it produced any effect upon him, nobody knew it, for there was not the smallest elation in his manner, or, in fact, any change whatever in him.

"That pamphlet ends my guardianship," remarked old Tom Shapleigh shrewdly, "although the boy is still ten months off from his majority."

Mr. Shapleigh had been vainly trying to get young Skelton to attend the University of Virginia, but at this time, without consulting his guardian, Skelton betook himself to Princeton. To say that old Tom was in a royal rage is putting it very mildly. He felt himself justified in his wrath, but was careful to exercise it at long range—in writing furious letters, to which Skelton vouchsafed no reply. Nevertheless old Tom promptly cashed the drafts made on him by his ward. At Princeton Skelton apparently spent his time reading French novels, smoking, and studying problems in chess; but at the end of two years it was discovered that he had made a higher average than had ever been made by any man at the university except Aaron Burr. As if content with this, however, Skelton left without taking his degree. But about that time he published a pamphlet under his own name. The title was Voices of the People. Its success was vast and immediate, even surpassing that of its predecessor. He was now twenty-two years old, his own master, graceful, full of distinction in his air and manner. The greatest things were expected of him.

CHAPTER III.

So far Skelton was a magnificent promise. He remained at Deerchase a year, which he spent chiefly in improving the house and grounds, which were already beautiful. This gave him a very good excuse for keeping strictly to himself. Then he determined to go to Europe. His old flame, Mrs. Jack Blair, now lived at Newington, and every time she looked out of her windows she could see the noble brick pile of Deerchase. The house was a fine old colonial mansion, with walls three feet thick, and numbers of large and lofty rooms. Skelton added to it with great taste, and had his grounds laid out by a famous landscape gardener. Newington was very shabby; and if Mrs. Blair had been an envious woman—which she was not—she might have suffered many pangs because of the contrast between the two places. Mrs. Shapleigh declared that Skelton's only object in improving Deerchase was to spite Mrs. Blair. But it certainly spited Mrs. Shapleigh dreadfully. She was seized with a desire that Belfield should rival Deerchase. Now, the Shapleighs were very well off, and Belfield was a large and handsome country house, but there was no rivalling Deerchase in the matter. Skelton had dollars where old Tom

Shapleigh had dimes. Whenever Mrs. Shapleigh would start the subject of improving Belfield, Mr. Shapleigh would become so totally and obstinately deaf that there was no making him hear at all; so, as Mrs. Shapleigh was a much-indulged woman, she went to work on her own hook to do landscape gardening, and to make Belfield as smart as Deerchase. The effect was fearful and wonderful. A Chinese pagoda was clapped on to one wing of the Belfield house. This was meant for a tower. Much red velvet furniture was bought, and old Tom paid the bills, grinning sardonically as he did it.

"I declare, Mr. Shapleigh," Mrs. Shapleigh bewailed, "you've got no feeling for your own flesh and blood. There's nothing more likely than that Sylvia will one day marry Richard Skelton, and then if we don't furnish up some and improve the place, everybody will say she never was accustomed to anything until she went to Deerchase."

Mr. Shapleigh declined to weep over this terrible prospect. Then came the ornamentation of the grounds. Mrs. Shapleigh's idea of decorative art was a liberal supply of fresh paint of every hue of the rainbow. She had an elaborate affair of knobs and lattice work, painted a vivid green, put up in the river between Deerchase and Belfield, in place of the old water fence of posts and rails. A fence of some sort was necessary to keep the cattle from wading down the salt marshes and following the river shore into forbidden fields. The cows came tramping placidly down the marshy creek until they got to the wonderful water fence, where they turned tail and trotted rapidly off, their frightened calves bleating after them. The picturesque, unpainted bridge across the creek was metamorphosed into a highly ornate construction with a summer house in the middle, expressly designed for Sylvia, who was then in short frocks, and Skelton to do their courting in eventually. Never was there such general overhauling and painting. The pigeon house was painted red and the turnstiles blue. When everything was done, and Mrs. Shapleigh was felicitating herself that Richard Skelton could no longer have the satisfaction of thinking Deerchase was unsurpassed, Skelton could not look toward Belfield without laughing, nor could anybody else, for that matter.

Skelton spent a full year at Deerchase, and just as he had brought the house and grounds to perfection this sudden idea of going to Europe possessed him. It was a great undertaking in those days. He had nobody to consult, nobody knew he was going, and nobody would grieve for him except some of the older house servants. Although Skelton was an indulgent master, he never exchanged a word with his negroes, who were entirely managed by overseers. The afternoon before he left he was on the river in his boat. It was a cloudy September day. Usually the scene was full of light and glow—the broad, bright river, the cheerful homesteads, his own beautiful Deerchase, and not even Mrs. Shapleigh, had been able to spoil the fair face of Nature with her miscalled ornamentation; but on that day it was dull and inexpressibly gloomy. A grey mist folded the distant landscape. The river went sullenly to the sea. Afar off in the marshes could be heard the booming of the frogs—the most doleful of sounds—

and the occasional fugitive cry of birds going south rang shrilly from the leaden sky.

Skelton sailed up and down, almost up to Newington, and down again to Lone Point—a dreary, sandy point, where three tall and melancholy pine trees grew almost at the water's edge, and where the river opened widely into the bay. He felt that strange mixture of sadness and exultation which people felt in those far-off days when they were about to start for distant countries. There was not a soul in sight, except in the creek by the water fence; Sylvia Shapleigh was standing barefooted, with her skirts tucked up. Her shoes and stockings lay on the bank. She had on a white sunbonnet, much beruffled, and was holding something down in the water with a forked stick.

She was then about twelve years old, with a delicate, pretty, thoughtful face, and beautiful grey eyes. So unlike was she to her father and mother that she might have been a changeling.

Skelton guessed at once what she was after. She was catching the crabs that came up to feed in these shallow, marshy creeks; but after pinning her crab down she was evidently in a quandary how to get at him. As Skelton watched her with languid interest she suddenly gave a faint scream, her sunbonnet fell off into the water, and she stood quite still and began to cry.

Skelton ran the boat's nose ashore within twenty yards of her, and, jumping out, went to her, splashing through the water.

"Oh, oh!" screamed poor Sylvia, "my foot—he's got my foot!"

Skelton raised her small white foot out of the water, and in half a minute the crab was dexterously "spancelled" and thrown away, but there was a cruel mark on the child's foot, and blood was coming. She looked at Skelton with wide, frightened eyes, crying bitterly all the time.

"Come, my dear," said Skelton, soothingly, "let me pick you up and carry you home."

"I d-d-don't want to go home," wailed Sylvia.

"But something must be done for your foot, child."

"Then take me to Deerchase, and let Mammy Kitty do it."

Skelton was puzzled by the child's unwillingness to go home. But Sylvia soon enlightened him.

"If I g-go home mamma will scold me, and she will cry over me, and make me keep on crying, and that will make my head ache; and if I can get s-something done for my foot—"

"But won't your mother be frightened about you if I take you to Deerchase?" asked Skelton.

"No—ooo—oo!" bawled Sylvia, still weeping; "she lets me stay out until sundown. And she'll make *such* a fuss over my foot if I go home!"

Determination was expressed in every line of Sylvia's tearful, pretty face. Skelton silently went back to the shore, got her shoes and stockings, went to his boat and brought it up, Sylvia meanwhile keeping up a furious beating of the water with her forked stick to frighten the crabs off. Skelton lifted her in the boat, and they sailed along to the Deerchase landing. Sylvia wiped her feet on the curtain of her sunbonnet, put on her stockings and one shoe, and nursed the injured foot tenderly. Skelton lifted her out on the little stone pier he had had built, and then proceeded to take down the sail and tie the boat.

"I think," said Sylvia calmly, "you'll have to carry me to the house."

"Hadn't you better let me send for my *calèche* and pair for you?" gravely asked Skelton.

"Oh, no," cried Sylvia briskly, and Skelton without a word picked her up and walked across the grassy lawn to the house. She was very light, and, except for flapping her wet sunbonnet in his face, he had no objection whatever to her. He carried her up the steps into the hall, and then turned her over to Mammy Kitty, who wrapped her foot in wet cabbage-leaves. Skelton went to the library. Presently Bob Skinny's woolly head was thrust in the door.

"Please, sah, Mr. Skelton, de young lady say will you please to come d'yar?"

Skelton, smiling at himself, rose and went back to the hall. Sylvia was perched on one foot, like a stork.

"I think," she said, "if you'll give me your arm I can walk around and look at the pretty things. Whenever I've been here with mamma she has always asked so many questions that I didn't like to ask any myself."

"You may ask any questions you like," replied Skelton, still smiling. He never remembered exchanging a word with the child before. He had taken for granted that she was her mother's own daughter, and as such he had no wish to cultivate her.

But Sylvia was not at all like her mother. She limped around the hall, looking gravely at the portraits.

The Skeltons were a handsome family, if the portraits could be believed. They were all dark, with clear-cut faces and high aquiline noses like Skelton's, and they were all young.

"*We* have some portraits, you know," remarked Sylvia, "but they are all old and ugly. Now, all of these are of pretty little girls and boys or handsome young ladies."

"The Skeltons are not a long-lived family," said Skelton. "They generally die before forty. Here is one—Janet Skelton—a little girl like you. She died at eighteen."

Sylvia turned her grey eyes full of a limpid green light towards him pityingly.

"Aren't you going to live long?"

"Perhaps," replied Skelton, smiling.

"I think," said Sylvia calmly, after a while, "if I were grown up I should like to live here."

"Very well," answered Skelton, who at twenty-two thought the twelve-year-old Sylvia a toddling infant; "as I intend to be an old bachelor, you may come and be my little sister. You may have my mother's room—here it is."

He opened a door close by, and they entered a little sitting room, very simple and old-fashioned, and in no way corresponding to the rest of the house. It had whitewashed walls above the wainscoting, and the furniture was in faded yellow damask.

"I intend to let this room remain as it is, to remind me that I was once a boy, for this is the first room I remember in the Deerchase house."

Sylvia looked around with calmly contemptuous eyes.

"When I come to Deerchase to live I shall make this room as fine as the rest. But I must go home now. I can get my shoe on, and perhaps mamma won't notice that I limp a little. You'd better take me in the boat, so I can get back to the house from the river shore."

Skelton, who thought it high time she was returning, at once agreed. As he lifted her out of the boat on the Belfield shore a sudden impulse made him say:

"Sylvia, can you keep a secret?"

"Of course I can," answered Sylvia promptly.

"Then—I am going away to-morrow morning, to be gone a year, perhaps longer. This is the last sail I shall take upon the river for a long, long time."

Sylvia's eyes were full of regret. Although she had seen Skelton at a distance nearly every day of her life when he was at Deerchase, and had also seen him upon the rare occasions that visits were exchanged between the two places, yet he had all the charm of a new and dazzling acquaintance to her. She never remembered speaking a word with him before, but there was a delightful intimacy between them now, she thought. She expressed her regret at his going so volubly that Skelton was forced to laugh; and she wound up by flinging her arms around his neck and kissing him violently. At this Skelton thought it time to leave. His last glimpse of Sylvia was as she stood swinging her wet, white sunbonnet dolefully on the sandy shore.

That night a terrible storm came up. It flooded all the low-lying fields, swept over the prim gardens at Deerchase, and washed away a part of the bridge between Deerchase and Belfield. When, at daylight in the morning, Skelton, with Bob Skinny, left Deerchase, everything was under water, and trees and shrubs and fences and hedges bore witness of the fury of the wind and the rain. Skelton's last view of Deerchase was a gloomy one. He meant then to be gone a year; he remained away fifteen years.

CHAPTER IV.

MEANWHILE things went on placidly enough around the silent and uninhabited Deerchase. The negroes worked the plantation under the overseer's management, and the house was well cared for, as well as the grounds. Every year there was an alarm that Skelton was coming home, but he never came. At last, like a thunderclap, came the news that he was married to an English woman of rank and wealth.

Sylvia Shapleigh was then eighteen, pretty and full of romance. That one interview with Skelton had been with her the dividing line between childhood and womanhood. She brooded over it, and as she grew older she fell in love with an imaginary Skelton, who was to come home and make her the grandest lady in the county. She began to look upon Deerchase as her own, and could picture vividly to herself her gay and splendid life there. She was haughty to the young squires who openly admired her, and secretly declared herself meat for their masters. She was proud and spirited to the last degree, and it seemed to her in her arrogance and inexperience, that Nature had destined her for something great; and what could be greater than to be Mrs. Richard Skelton?

When the news came of Skelton's marriage, Mrs. Shapleigh was luckily away from home on a visit of several days. Sylvia, on hearing of the marriage, rose and went to her own room, where she gave way to a passion of disappointment as acute as if the bond between Richard Skelton and herself were a real one, instead of the mere figment of a child's imagination. It made no difference that it was wholly baseless and fanciful. In that simple and primitive age, romantic young things like Sylvia had plenty of time and opportunity to cultivate sentiment. The only really splendid thing she ever saw in her life was Deerchase, and she saw it whenever she chose to turn her eyes toward it. She knew nothing of the power of new scenes to make one forget the old ones, and the extreme prettiness of the story that she made up for Skelton and herself charmed her. But then came this sudden disillusion. In the twinkling of an eye her castle in Spain fell, to rise no more.

But Sylvia, in common with most people who possess thinking and feeling powers of a high order, had also a great fund of sound good sense, which came to her rescue. She learned to smile at her own childish folly, but it was rather a sad and bitter smile: the folly was childish, but the pain was startlingly real. She did not like to look at Deerchase after that, because it brought home to her how great a fool she had been. And then, having lost that illusion—sad to say—she had no other to take its place. Nothing is more intolerable to a young, imaginative soul than to be turned out of the fairy kingdom of fancy. It is all theirs—palaces, smiling courtiers, crown jewels, and all—and they revel in a royal summer time. Then, some fine day, the pretty dream melts away and leaves a black abyss, and then Common Sense, the old curmudgeon, shows himself; and when, as in Sylvia's case, the palace would be rebuilt, the flattering courtiers recalled, the recollection of the pain of its destruction is too keen. Driven by common sense, Sylvia concluded to live in the real world, not in the imaginary one. This wise resolve was a good deal helped by the grotesque form the same picture that had been in her mind took in Mrs. Shapleigh's. Sylvia could not help laughing any more than Mr. Shapleigh could when Mrs. Shapleigh was all for his sending a letter to Skelton, reproaching him for his "shameful treatment of Sylvia."

The worthy woman had got all the particulars of that odd, childish visit out of Sylvia, and bewailed herself as follows:

"Was there ever such a poor, unlucky creature as I! Here for eighteen years I've had but one single, solitary idea in my head, and that was to see Sylvia mistress of Deerchase; and all through your fault, Mr. Shapleigh, in not throwing them together when you were Richard Skelton's guardian, I am a heartbroken and disappointed woman. But now that I've had this awful blow, it's as little as you can do to improve the house and put me up a new wing, as I've often asked you."

"Put you up a new swing?" asked Mr. Shapleigh, becoming very deaf. "Now, Belinda, what on earth do you want with a swing at your time of life? You'll be wanting a skipping-rope next."

Mr. Shapleigh's deafness was so obstinate regarding the proposed new wing that Mrs. Shapleigh was unable to make him understand her.

Within six months came another startling piece of information. Skelton's wife had died, and had left him a great fortune upon condition that he did not marry again.

This nearly drove Mrs. Shapleigh crazy, and Mrs. Shapleigh, in turn, nearly drove Mr. Shapleigh crazy. Between the propriety and excellence of Mrs. Skelton's dying and the abominable means she took to prevent Sylvia from marrying Skelton—for, of course, the whole scheme was levelled at Sylvia—Mrs. Shapleigh was at a loss whether to consider the dead woman as her best friend or her greatest enemy. Sylvia by that time had grown sensible. She had learned in that first ridiculous yet terrible experience the dangers of her splendid imagination and intense emotions, and resolved upon learning to govern both—and Sylvia had a good strong will of her own. She even smiled as she thought how tremendously she had concerned herself, at the time of Skelton's marriage, about what really did not concern her in the least.

Still Skelton did not come home. The old expectations of his coming intellectual achievements had by no means vanished. He had given such extraordinary promise! But there was time enough—he was not yet thirty. He was known to be studying at the German universities. He still kept up his interest in his Virginia affairs, and, although on the other side of the water, he even had a fine racing stable organised under the charge of Miles Lightfoot, who was a cross between a gentleman and a "leg." Racing was the sport in those days, and the Campdown Jockey Club had just been started upon an imposing basis. Skelton became a liberal subscriber, and Miles Lightfoot was understood to have *carte blanche* in the great affair of making Skelton's stable the finest one in the State. Whatever Skelton did he must do better than anybody else, and, since his large access of fortune, money was less than ever an object to him. Skelton always heard with pleasure of his successes on the turf, and Miles Lightfoot found out by some occult means that his own excellent place and salary, from a professional point of view, depended upon Skelton's horses always beating Jack Blair's. For Skelton never forgot a friend or an enemy.

At first this rivalry between Skelton's stable and what Jack Blair modestly called his "horse or two" was a joke on the courthouse green and the race track. But when ten years had passed, and Jack Blair had been steadily losing money all the time on account of matching his horses against Skelton's, it had ceased to be a joke. Blair had more than the average man's pugnacity, and having early suspected that Skelton meant to ruin him, it only aroused a more dogged spirit of opposition in him. Old Tom Shapleigh in the beginning urged Blair to draw out of the fight, but Blair, with a very natural and human aggressiveness, refused. Elizabeth at first shared Blair's confidence that he could beat Skelton's horses as easily as he had run away with Skelton's sweetheart, but she soon discovered her mistake. Blair was a superb farmer. He had twelve hundred acres under cultivation, and every year the bags of wheat marked "Newington" commanded a premium in the Baltimore market. But no matter how many thousand bushels of wheat Blair might raise, that "horse or two" ate it all up.

There were two Blair children, Hilary and little Mary. Elizabeth Blair was full of ambition for her boy. He was to be educated as his father had been, first at William and Mary, afterwards at the University of Virginia. But she discovered that there was no money either to send the boy to school or to employ a tutor at home. Mrs. Blair bore this, to her, dreadful privation and disappointment with courage, partly born of patience and partly of a woman's natural vanity. Blair never ceased to impress upon her that since Skelton chose to harbour his revenge all those years, that he—Blair—could not refuse to meet him, particularly as he had carried off the prize matrimonial in the case. Blair had the most winning manner in the world. When he would tip his wife's chin up with his thumb, and say, "Hang it, Bess, I'll meet Skelton on the race track, in the hunting field, anywhere he likes, and take my chances with him as I did before: I had tremendous odds against me then, but Fortune favoured me," Elizabeth would feel an ineffable softness stealing over her towards her husband. Not many wives could boast of that sort of gallantry from their husbands. Blair was not disposed to underrate his triumph over Skelton. Every defeat of his "horse or two" was met by a debonair laugh, and a reminder, "By Jove, his horses may leg it faster than mine, but I beat him in a better race and for a bigger stake than any ever run on a race course!"

This keeping alive of the old rivalry contained in it a subtile flattery to Elizabeth. But Blair himself was well calculated to charm. He was fond of a screeching run after the hounds, as Skelton contemptuously said, but he was a gentleman from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot. He might not give Hilary a tutor, or Mary a governess, but his children never heard him utter a rude word to their mother or anyone else, or saw him guilty of the smallest *gaucherie* in word or deed. His negroes adored him, his horses came at his voice, his dogs disputed with his children for the touch of his hand. He knew all the poetry and romance existing, and a great many other things besides.

It was easy enough to understand why he was the pet and darling of women—for the sex is discerning. Your true woman's man is always a good deal of a man. This was the case with Jack Blair, in spite of his fatal fondness for a certain ellipse of a mile and a quarter, upon which he had lost more money than he cared to own up to. But, at least, there was no deceit about Blair. Elizabeth often implored him to promise her never to bet at the races, never to bet at cards, and a great many other things; but he always refused. "No," he said, "I'll make no promise I can't keep. I may not be the best husband in the world, but at least I've never lied to you, and I don't propose to put myself in the way of temptation now."

It was true that he had never even used a subterfuge towards her. But Elizabeth was haunted by a fear that Blair thought lightly of money obligations, and that inability to pay was not, to him, the terrible and disgraceful thing it was to her. Then, she was tormented by a perfectly ridiculous and feminine jealousy. For all she was a clever enough woman, in the matter of jealousy and a few other trifles of that kind all women are fools alike. This amused Blair hugely, who had a smile and a soft word and a squeeze of the hand for every woman in the county, Mrs. Shapleigh included, but who was the soul of loyalty to Elizabeth. If only he would give up horse racing! for so Elizabeth came to think to herself when the mortgages multiplied on Newington, and after every fall and spring meeting of the Jockey Club she was called upon to sign her name to something or other that Blair paid her for in the tenderest kisses. But there seemed to be a sort of fatality about the whole thing. Blair was thought to be the best judge of horses in the county, yet he rarely had a good horse, and more rarely still won a race. Something always happened at the last minute to upset his triumph. Like all men who are the willing victims of chance, Blair was a firm believer in luck. Everybody knows, he argued, that luck ebbs and flows. The more he lost on the Campdown course, the more he was eventually bound to win on that very course. Elizabeth, with her practical woman's wit, did not believe at all in luck, but she believed in Blair, which was the same thing in that case. The county was a great one for racing, and at Abingdon Church every Sunday, the affairs of the Jockey Club were so thoroughly discussed by gentlemen sitting around on the flat tombstones during sermon time, that the formal meetings were merely perfunctory. This way of turning church into a club meeting sincerely distressed the clergyman, the Rev. Mr. Conyers.

CHAPTER V.

Mr. Conyers was one of the county gentry by birth, but it seemed as if the whole theory of heredity, as well as tradition, fell through in his case. The people had been used to jolly parsons, who rode to hounds and could stand up to their bottles of port quite as well as the laity. Indeed, it was reported that Mr. Conyer's predecessor upon occasions only got to church in time to hustle his cassock on over his hunting jacket and breeches. But Conyers was more soul and spirit than body. He grew up tall, pale, slender, with but one wish on earth—to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. He was an ascetic by nature—an ascetic among people whose temperaments were sybaritic, and to whom nature and circumstance cried perpetually, "Eat, drink, and be merry." They were a very honest and chivalrous people, but their spiritual part had been feebly developed. Religion to them meant morality. To Conyers it meant morality and the whole question of man's relations to his Maker besides.

Conyers fancied that when he had begun his scholastic training for the ministry he would enter upon that course of enlightenment of the soul for which he longed. He was cruelly disappointed. He got a great deal of morality still, a little weak theology, and a general recommendation from his ecclesiastical superiors not to be too curious. He was astute enough to see that morality was one thing and religion another, but that as long as he maintained a high standard of personal behaviour he would be allowed a fearful liberty in his beliefs. It was not an age or a place of religious enquiry, and Conyers found that all the excellent young men prepared with him for the ministry, were perfectly well satisfied with historical and biblical explanations which, to him, appeared grotesquely insufficient. When his soul craved a knowledge of the Christian religion from its beginning, and when he would have studied it from the point of sincere belief in regard to its scope, design, and its effect on man, he was expected to confine his investigations within an inconceivably narrow range. Although knowing instinctively the difference between moral practices and religious beliefs, Conyers was too earnest a lover of moral beauty to put faith in any except a good man, and he early found that some very bad men were the fountain head of certain of his beliefs. He did not lack either courage or good parts, but he lacked knowledge dreadfully, and there was no fountain open to him. But the seal of the Levite was put upon him at his birth; tormented with doubts longings, and terrible questionings, he must still preach the Word. He kept his burning thoughts to himself, and received ordination from highly moral men who had never thought enough to harbour a doubt. He went back to his native county an ordained clergyman, to begin what he believed to be his labour in his Master's vineyard. But never had shepherd such a flock. When he tried to teach them spiritual things, they resented it as an attack on their morals. Old Tom Shapleigh, who was a vestryman, embodied the prevailing sentiment in his reply to Conyers when the clergyman tried to find out old Tom's spiritual attitude.

"Now, look here, Conyers, I've known you ever since you were born, and I was a regular communicant in Abingdon church before your father married your mother. I was married by a bishop—yes, zounds, sir, by a bishop!—and pretty dear it cost me in more ways than one. I don't ill-treat my wife, or starve my negroes, or cheat my neighbour, and, further than that, you have nothing to do. Spiritual attitude be hanged! Go after the women if you want to talk that sort of thing."

Some of the women, notably Mrs. Blair, had a tender, religious sentiment that was grateful to poor Conyers, going blindly upon his way. But he could not accept the popular doctrine that only women had any spiritual side. To him the great fundamental facts of existence—the soul, the future life, all the mysterious hopes and fears of poor humanity concerning that future life—were problems that no thinking man could thrust aside. But when he tried to penetrate further than Mrs. Blair's simple belief, her daily reading of the Bible to her children and servants, he found that he only startled and confused her. When he tried to get at the master of the house, Blair flatly refused to have anything to say regarding the state of his soul. The men like old Tom Shapleigh guyed Conyers; the men of finer fiber, like Jack Blair, avoided him. When Mr. Conyers, meeting Blair in the road, tried to talk religion to him, Blair put spurs to his horse and galloped off, laughing. When Conyers came to Newington on the same errand Blair announced to his wife that it was useless.

"I'll be shot if any parson living shall meddle with my religion! I don't mind a little sermonising from you, my dear, and you know I made an agreement with you that if you'd let me smoke in the drawing room I'd stand a chapter in the Bible every night; and the fact is, a man will take a little religious dragooning from his wife or his mother without grumbling. But when it comes to a man's trying it—why, Conyers is an ass, that's all."

Poor Conyers, repulsed on every side, knew not what to do. He found but one person in the whole community willing to *think* on the subject of religion, although the women were usually quite ready enough to *feel.* This was Sylvia Shapleigh. But Sylvia wanted to be instructed.

"Tell me," she said, "what is true? The Bible puzzles me; I can't understand it. Do you?"

Conyers remained silent.

"I see the necessity for right living, Mr. Conyers, for right feeling; but—there is something more. I know it as well as you."

Conyers's glance sought Sylvia's. Usually his eyes were rather cold and expressionless, but now they were full of a strange distress, an untold misery. Here was the first human being who had ever asked him for knowledge, and he was as helpless to answer her as a little child. And he aspired to be a teacher of men! He went home and studied furiously at some expurgated copies of the Fathers he possessed, and at a few more or less acute commentaries upon them: they did not give him one ray of light. He had two or three one-sided histories of the Reformation: these he read, and cast them aside in disgust. The readiness with which creeds were made, changed, made again, in the fifteenth century had always astounded and disheartened him. The old, old difficulty came back to him—provision was made everywhere for man's moral nature, and he earnestly believed that provision had been made for man's spiritual nature, but he could not find that provision in the narrow sphere to which his learning and his observation was confined. But cast, as he was, upon a vast and unknown sea of doubt, and feeling that he knew nothing, and could explain nothing, he confined himself to a plain and evangelical style of preaching and an ascetic strictness of life. He made some vain appeals for help from his ecclesiastical superior, the bishop, but the bishop plainly did not understand what Conyers was after, and bade him rather sharply to cease from troubling. He reminded Conyers of what a good salary Abingdon church paid him, and in what a very agreeable and hospitable community his lot was cast. As for the salary, it was very good on paper. But the laity had a fearful power over the clergy, for all of a clergyman's comfort depended upon whether he made himself agreeable to his parishioners or not. Conyers found this the most harrowing, debasing, unapostolic circumstance in all his long list of miseries. He earned a living, but he had trouble in getting it. He was distinctly unpopular, and one of his first acts after taking charge of the parish was calculated to foment his unpopularity. He had scruples about slavery, as he had about everything, for he was a man tormented by a devil of scrupulosity. He had inherited five negroes, and these he set free and commended them to God. The result was appalling. Of the five, two became confirmed criminals, two died of exposure and neglect of themselves, and one was hanged for murder. The planters, seeing their own well-fed, well-cared-for slaves around them, pointed to Conyers's experiment with triumph. *That* was what freeing a lot of irresponsible half-monkeys meant! This humble tragedy haunted Conyers night and day, and almost drove him mad. Conyers had not been a young man when he was ordained, but after this he lost every vestige of youth. There were cruel hollows in his face, and his strange eyes grew more and more distressed in their expression. Nevertheless, he would not abandon any one of his theories and principles. The people were far from vindictive. On the contrary, they were singularly amiable and easy-going; and had they been any less easy-going, pastor and people would certainly have parted company. It would have required a concerted effort to get rid of him, and Conyers, although he would cheerfully have given up his daily bread for conscience' sake, yet could not bear to part with his dream of being a teacher and preacher. And he knew what a discredited clergyman meant. So, alternately harassed with doubts and fixed in a dull despair, he presented that spectacle which the heathen philosopher declared to be the most touching sight in the world—a good man in adversity. His adversity had a practical side to it, too. As his congregation did not like him, they were lax about paying his salary. The pastors they were used to complained readily enough when the stipend was not forthcoming and drummed up delinquents briskly, which was a very good and wholesome thing for the delinquents; and it had not been so very long ago since the heavy hand of the law was laid upon parishioners who were forgetful of this. But the people waited for Conyers to remind them of what they owed, and he would rather have starved by inches than have asked them for a penny. So in this hospitable, delightful parish he was miserably, desperately poor. The only thing he wanted of his parishioners was what was due him, and that was the only thing they would not give him, for they were not ungenerous in other ways, and occasionally sent him bottles of Madeira when the rectory roof was leaking, and old Tom Shapleigh sent him regularly every winter a quarter of beef, which spoiled before the half of it was eaten. Conyers still took comfort in the tender emotional religion of some of the women, but Sylvia Shapleigh, whose restless mind traversed mental depths and heights unknown to most women, was the one, single, solitary person in the world who really understood why it was that Conyers was not a happy man. Sylvia herself, with a great flow of spirits and much wit and a ridiculously overrated beauty, was not happy either. Her good looks were overrated because she was so charming; but as she passed for a beauty it was all one. She had, it is true, a pair of lovely grey eyes, and a delicate complexion like a March primrose, and her walk was as graceful as the swallow's flight. She was getting perilously fast out of her twenties, and there was apparently no more prospect of her marrying than at eighteen. Yet, just as people always expected Skelton to perform some wonderful intellectual achievement, so they still expected Sylvia to make a great match.

At last, fifteen years after Skelton had left Deerchase, he returned to it as suddenly as he left it. He brought with him Bob Skinny, who had become a perfect monster of uppishness, airs, and conceit; Bulstrode, who was understood to be a remarkable scholar and Skelton's assistant in preparing the great work that was to revolutionise the world; and Lewis Pryor, a black-eyed boy whom Skelton represented to be the orphan child of a friend of his, a professor at Cambridge. People were still talking about Skelton's wonderful promise. He was then getting on towards forty years old, and had not written a line since "Voices of the People." The subject he was engaged upon for his wonderful forthcoming book was not precisely known, but it was understood to be a philosophical work, which would not leave the Christian religion a leg to stand upon.

CHAPTER VI.

When Skelton's arrival was known it made a tremendous sensation. Mrs. Blair turned a beautiful rosy red when Blair brought the news home. At thirty-five she was still girlish-looking, and her dark eyes were as bright as ever.

"Ah, my girl," cried Blair, with his offhand tenderness, "Skelton has never forgiven me for getting ahead of him with you; but if he had got ahead of me—why, damme, I'd have broken his neck for him long before this!"

Sylvia Shapleigh felt a little ashamed, as she always did at the mention, or even the mere thought, of Skelton—she had been such a very, very great fool! and she had a lively apprehension of her mother's course upon the occasion, which was fully justified by events.

"Mr. Shapleigh," began Mrs. Shapleigh one evening, the very first week after Skelton's arrival at Deerchase, "you will have to go and call upon Richard Skelton, for it would break my heart if I did not see some of those elegant things he has brought home in that pile of boxes that came up from the wharf to-day."

"Certainly, my love, I shall call to see him. As his former guardian, I feel it incumbent; but, really, the fellow always interested me, for all his confounded supercilious airs."

"Well, Mr. Shapleigh, you seem to have altogether forgotten his treatment of Sylvia; and that English wife of his put it out of his power to marry again, just to spite my poor child."

Luckily Sylvia was out of the room during this; but just then she entered, with a book in her hand, and seated herself at the round mahogany table in the corner of the room, upon which a tall lamp burned with shaded softness. Mrs. Shapleigh wisely dropped that branch of the subject when Sylvia appeared.

"Anyhow, Mr. Shapleigh," resumed Mrs. Shapleigh, "we shall be obliged to ask Richard Skelton to dinner. We can't get out of *that*."

"Very well, my darling love, we will have Skelton to dinner."

"But, Mr. Shapleigh, how can we possibly have Richard Skelton to dinner, when he is accustomed to so much elegance abroad? And although we live as well as any people in the county, yet it is nothing to what he will have at Deerchase."

"Then, my life, we won't have Skelton to dinner."

"Now, Mr. Shapleigh, how you talk! You contradict yourself at every other word.—Sylvia, what have you to say on the subject? I declare, you read so much you don't know anything. The simplest thing seems to puzzle you."

"Not at all, mamma!" cried Sylvia, with spirit, and bringing her book together with a clap. "Have

Mr. Skelton to dinner, by all means—just as we would have the Blairs, or any other of the neighbours. I don't care a fig for his elegance. We are just as good as the Skeltons any day; and any one of us—papa, or you, or I—is twice as good-looking as Mr. Skelton."

Sylvia was fond of disparaging Skelton both to herself and to other people.

"Sylvia! Sylvia, my child!" screamed Mrs. Shapleigh; "your vanity is very unladylike, and, besides, it is sinful, too. Nobody ever heard *me* say such a thing, although I had a much greater reputation for good looks than you ever had. But if my glass pleased me, *I* never said anything."

"You very seldom say anything, my love," remarked old Tom, quite gravely.

"Well, Mr. Shapleigh, I hope the next time you get married you will marry a loquacious woman, and then, perhaps, you'll long for your poor, dear, humble Belinda. But to get back to the dinner. Of course, we must have everything just as nearly like the way they have it at Deerchase as possible, although how on earth we can have things the least like they do at Deerchase, even if I put out every piece of glass and silver I have in the world, is more than I can tell. But whom shall we ask? That queer person that Richard Skelton brought home to write his book—Mr. Bulstrode?"

"Yes, by all means," cried old Tom, grinning. "He looks to me likely to be an ornament to society."

"And Mr. and Mrs. Blair?"

"Exactly, my love. Blair and Skelton hate each other like the devil; and Mrs. Blair jilted Skelton, and I daresay has been sorry for it ever since. Oh, yes, we'll have the Blairs, madam."

"And Mr. Conyers?"

"Gadzooks, madam, you're a genius! Skelton doesn't believe in hell in the next world, and Conyers is trying to make a little hell of his own in Abingdon parish; so they will do excellently well together."

"Mr. Shapleigh, you don't mean to tell me that Richard Skelton doesn't *believe in hell?*" asked Mrs. Shapleigh in a shocked voice.

"I do, indeed, my sweet. I'm not sure that he believes in a personal devil, or the horns and the hoofs, or even the tail."

"Good gracious, Mr. Shapleigh!" cried Mrs. Shapleigh in much horror and distress. "If Mr. Skelton doesn't believe in a hell, we might as well give up asking him to dinner, because the bishop is coming next month, and he'll be certain to hear of it; and what will he say when he hears that we have been entertaining a person like Richard Skelton, who flies in the face of everything the bishop says we ought to believe!"

Mr. Shapleigh shook his head with waggish despair, and declared the dinner was out of the question. This, of course, renewed Mrs. Shapleigh's determination to have it, who reflected that, after all, the bishop might not hear of it, or perhaps he might die before his annual visitation came off—she had heard he had something the matter with his liver, anyhow.

Sylvia listened to the discussion calmly—she was used to this kind of thing; and as her father and mother never grew at all angry in these matrimonial tiffs, she did not mind them, having had a lifetime to become accustomed to them. But she felt acutely anxious about meeting Skelton, and, in a feminine way, about the dinner. She wanted everything to go off well, but with a person as wonderful as Mrs. Shapleigh, it was not safe to count on anything.

In due time old Tom called at Deerchase, and was received by Skelton with more courtesy and deference than ever before in his life. Skelton met him in the library—a part of the building erected the first year after Skelton left Princeton. It was a noble room, and from the floor to the lofty ceiling were books, books, books. Old Tom had never seen so many books together in his life before.

Skelton had changed but little. As a young man he had looked middle-aged; as a middle-aged man he looked young. His hair had a few grey threads in it, and Mrs. Shapleigh's eager eye discovered a small place on the top of his head, about as big as a half dollar, where the hair was getting thin; but it took Mrs. Shapleigh to find this out—Mr. Shapleigh didn't observe it at all. Skelton's only remarkable feature were his eyes, which were as black and soft and fascinating as ever. His manner had lost all of its early superciliousness—he knew too much then to be anything but simple and unassuming. But undoubtedly there was something imposing in his personality. He greeted old Tom cordially, and inquired after Mrs. Shapleigh and little Sylvia.

"You mean tall Sylvia, I presume," said old Tom, laughing. "She is nearly as tall as I am, and deuced-ly pretty, if I have any eyes. Pardon an old man's fondness, Skelton."

"No apology is needed. I am sure she is a lovely young woman; but I begin to realise how many milestones I have passed when I think of her as a woman grown."

"She's more than grown; she has been of a marriageable age for some years—but a proud creature she is. She gives all sorts of flippant reasons for refusing good matches; but the fact is, nobody is quite good enough for her ladyship—so Sylvia thinks."

"A proud, pretty creature she gave promise of being. However, we can't understand them—the simple creature, man, is no match for the complex creature, woman."

"O Lord, no!" Mr. Shapleigh brought this out with great emphasis, having in mind Mrs. Shapleigh and what he had heard of Skelton's late wife, who had put the very most effectual barrier he knew against her husband's marrying again.

"But now, Skelton," continued Mr. Shapleigh, earnestly, "we are looking forward to that something great which you are destined to do. No man I know of—including those fellows Burke and Sheridan—ever gave greater promise than you. By George! I shall never forget to my dying day the state of public feeling after the publication of that first pamphlet of yours. You would have been nominated to Congress by acclamation had you been twenty-one years old."

A flush rose in Skelton's dark face. That early triumph had been the bugbear of his whole life.

"I regard that as a very crude performance," he said curtly. "It happened to have a peculiar aptness—it struck a particular conjunction. That was the real reason of its success."

"Then do something better," cried old Tom.

"I hope to, some day," answered Skelton.

They were sitting in the embrasure of the library window. It was in a glorious midsummer, and the trees wore their greenest livery.

The bright pink masses of the crape myrtle trees glowed splendidly, and at the foot of the large lawn the broad, bright river ran laughing in the sun. The yellow noonday light fell directly upon Skelton's face—his olive complexion, his clear-cut features; there was not an uncertain line in his face. His lean, brown, sinewy hand rested on the arm of his chair. Old Tom, facing him, was a complete contrast—a keen-eyed man, for all he was a country squire, his fresh, handsome old face shining above his ruffled shirt-front and nankeen waistcoat.

"You've got a pretty good array of literary fellows about you," said old Tom, waving his stick around the library, which not even the July sun could make bright, but which glowed with the sombre beauty that seems to dwell in a true library.

"Yes," answered Skelton, "but I have an old fellow that is worth all the books to me—Bulstrode; he is a Cambridge man—carried off honours every year without turning a hair, and was classed as a wonder. But, you know, when God makes a genius he spoils a man. That's the way with Bulstrode. He's a perfectly worthless dog as far as making a living and a respectable place in society goes. He is simply a vulgarian pumped full of knowledge and with the most extraordinary powers of assimilation. He can't write—he has no gift of expression whatever. But I can give him ten words on a slip of paper, and in half an hour he can give me every idea and every reference upon any possible subject I demand. He is not a bad man; on the contrary, he has a sort of rude honour and conscience of his own. He refused orders in the English Church because he knew himself to be unfit. Besides looking after my books, he is tutor to Lewis Pryor, the son of an old friend and tutor of mine, the Rev. Thomas Pryor."

Skelton brought all this out in his usual calm, easy, man-of-the-world manner. At that moment the boy passed across the lawn very close to the window, where he stopped and whistled to his dog. Never were two pairs of eyes so alike as Skelton's and this boy's. Old Tom, turning his glance from the boy to Skelton, noticed a strange expression of fondness in Skelton's eyes as he looked at the boy.

"A very fine-looking youngster," said old Tom. "What are you going to do with him?"

"Educate him," answered Skelton, the indifference of his tone flatly contradicting the ineffably tender look of his eyes. "Bulstrode was made his guardian by one of those freaks of dying people. Pryor knew Bulstrode as well as I do, and he also knew that I would do a good part by the boy; but for some reason, or want of reason, he chose to leave the boy in Bulstrode's power. However, as Bulstrode is in my power, it does not greatly matter. The boy has a little property, and I intend giving him advantages. His father was a university man, and Lewis shall be too."

"I am afraid you will find the county dull after your life abroad," said old Tom, abruptly quitting the subject of Lewis Pryor.

"Not at all. I have felt for some years the necessity of settling down to work, if I ever expect to do anything. Travelling is a passion which wears itself out, just as other passions do. I can't understand a man's expatriating himself for ever. It is one of the benefits of a landed gentry that the soil grasps it. Nothing has such a hold on a man as land. It is one of the good points of our system. You see, I now admit that there is something good in our system, which I denied so vehemently before I was old enough to vote."

"Yes," answered Mr. Shapleigh. "Land, land, land! That's the cry of the Anglo-Saxon all over the world. That's why it is they are the dominant people; that's why it is that they cannot exist on terms of equality with any other race whatever."

"True," said Skelton. "All races that come in contact with them are held in bondage of some sort. Rule or ruin is the destiny of the Anglo-Saxon everywhere."

Skelton had not asked a single question about anybody in the county. This did not surprise old Tom, who was prepared to tell him a great deal had Skelton manifested the slightest curiosity. When he rose to go Skelton very civilly and gracefully thanked him for his care and guardianship, and made some slight, laughing apology for his own insubordination.

"No thanks at all—no thanks at all are due," answered old Tom jovially. "I rather enjoyed managing such a property, and I flatter myself it did not decrease in my hands. As for managing you—ha! ha!—I admit *that* was a flat failure. So you brought back that black rascal, Bob Skinny?"

"Oh, yes; and I daresay some fine morning the other negroes will take him out and hang him to a tree outside my bedroom window. The fellow is perfectly intolerable—can find nothing good enough for him at Deerchase. He is a natural and incorrigible liar; and, worse still, he has learned to play on what he calls the 'fluke,' and between playing the 'fluke,' and telling unconscionable lies about his travels, he is a nuisance. The housekeeper told me, this morning, there would be a mutiny soon among the house servants if Bob wasn't suppressed. But the dog knows his value to me, and presumes upon it, no doubt."

Then came the invitation to dinner at Belfield, which Skelton accepted politely, but he would do himself the honour to call on Mrs. Shapleigh and his little friend Sylvia beforehand.

The call was made, but neither of the ladies was at home. A day or two after, old Tom Shapleigh had occasion to go on an errand about their joint water rights, to Deerchase, and Mrs. Shapleigh went with him. Then, too, as by a singular fate, Skelton was out riding about the plantation. But Bulstrode and Lewis happened to be in the hall, and Mrs. Shapleigh, who was dying with curiosity, alighted and went in on their invitation.

Old Tom immediately began to talk to Bulstrode, while Mrs. Shapleigh bestowed her attentions on Lewis, much to his embarrassment. Suddenly, in the midst of the murmur of voices, Mrs. Shapleigh screeched out:

"La!"

"What is it, my dear?" asked old Tom, expecting to hear some such marvel as that the floor was beautifully dry rubbed, or that Skelton had cut down a decaying cedar near the house.

"Did you ever see such a likeness as that between this boy and that picture of Richard Skelton's father over yonder?"

Every eye except Lewis's was turned towards the portrait. Skelton had had all of his family portraits touched up by a competent artist, who had practically done them over. The portrait was of a boy dressed in colonial costume, with his hair falling over a wide lace collar. He was about Lewis's age, and the likeness was indeed extraordinary. It was hung in a bad light though, and if it had been designed to keep it out of sight its situation could not have been better.

Bulstrode glanced quickly at Lewis. The boy's eyes were bent upon the ground and his whole face was crimson. Old Tom was glaring at Mrs. Shapleigh, who, however, prattled on composedly:

"Of course, I recollect Mr. Skelton very well; but as he was at least thirty before I ever knew him, he had outgrown those clothes, and looked a good deal more than fifteen or sixteen. But it is certainly the most wonderful—"

"My love," cried old Tom in a thundering voice, "look at those Venetian blinds. If you'd like some to your drawing-room I'll stand the expense, by Gad!"

This acted on poor, good Mrs. Shapleigh's mind like a large stone laid before a rushing locomotive. It threw her completely off the track, and there was no more danger of her getting back on it. But Bulstrode observed that Lewis Pryor did not open his mouth to say another word during the rest of the visit. As soon as the Shapleighs left, Lewis took his dog and disappeared until late in the afternoon. When he came in to dinner he avoided Bulstrode's eyes, and looked so woe-begone that Bulstrode felt sorry for him. However, Skelton knew nothing of all this, and it so happened that he did not meet the Shapleighs, or, indeed, any of the county people, until the day of the dinner at Belfield. Blair meanwhile had called too, but, like the Shapleighs, had found Skelton out on the plantation, and eagerly professed to be unable to wait for his return home; so that the day of the dinner was the first time that the Shapleighs, or, indeed, any of the county people, had seen Skelton.

Mrs. Shapleigh had heard that Skelton dined late, so she named six o'clock for the dinner—a perfectly preposterous hour at that period of the nineteenth century. She also managed to have three men to wait at dinner by pressing into the service James, the coachman and gardener. James was an inky-black object, who, with a pair of large white cotton gloves on, was as helpless as a turtle on his back. However, Mrs. Shapleigh was a first-class housekeeper, and the dinner was sure to be a good one—so Sylvia comforted herself. Skelton quite truthfully said it was the best dinner he had seen since he left Virginia—turtle soup, oysters in half a dozen ways, a royal display of fish, a saddle of venison, wild ducks and woodcock and partridges, a ham cured with hickory ashes and boiled in two quart bottles of old Tom Shapleigh's best champagne. There were, besides, a great many and-so-forths, but Skelton did not say that he enjoyed the dinner particularly, and so saved his reputation for truth.

As a matter of fact, he regarded it as something worse than a bore. He shrewdly suspected that Elizabeth Blair would be there, and it would be his first meeting with her after that awkward little *contretemps* of so many years ago—for he had managed to avoid her during that solitary year he spent at Deerchase. In fact, everybody invited to the dinner was in more or less trepidation.

Skelton arrived punctually at six o'clock, and Bulstrode was with him. Everybody else, though, had taken six o'clock to mean half-past five, and were promptly on hand. It was not quite dusk, and the purple twilight was visible through the open windows, but the wax candles were lighted and glowed softly in the mellow half-light.

Old Tom greeted Skelton cordially, and so did Mrs. Shapleigh, who had temporarily buried the hatchet, and who comforted herself by thinking how awfully sorry Skelton would be that he couldn't marry Sylvia when he saw her and heard her play on the guitar and sing. Mrs. Shapleigh herself was still beautiful; the face that had blinded old Tom thirty years before to the infinite silliness of the woman who owned it had not lost its colour or regularity. But its power to charm faded with its first youth. Stranger than the power of beauty is the narrow limits to which it is restricted. These ideas passed through Skelton's mind as he saw Mrs. Shapleigh the first time in fifteen years. Sylvia, though, without one half her mother's beauty, possessed all the charm and grace the older woman lacked. Skelton glanced at her with calm though sincere approval. She was very like the little girl who had swung her white sun-bonnet at him, although he knew she must be quite twenty-seven years old; but in her grey eyes was a perpetual girlish innocence she could never lose. Then came the difficult part—speaking to Mr. and Mrs. Blair. Mrs. Blair complicated the situation by blushing suddenly and furiously down to her white throat when Skelton took her hand. Skelton could cheerfully have wrung her neck in rage for her blushing at that moment. She was changed, of course, from seventeen, but Skelton thought her rather improved; she had gained colour and flesh without losing her slenderness. Jack Blair had got very middle-aged looking, to Skelton's eyes, and his youthful trimness and slimness were quite gone; but nobody had found it out except Skelton. Then there was the long, thin parson with the troubled eyes. Bulstrode was as awkward as a walrus in company, and glanced sympathetically at James, black and miserable, whose feelings he quite divined.

Sylvia in the course of long years had been forced to acquire quite an extraordinary amount of tact, in order to cover the performances of Mrs. Shapleigh, and she found she had use for all of it. Mrs. Shapleigh, however, was completely awed by the deadly civility with which Skelton received all of her *non sequiturs*, and soon relapsed into a blessed silence.

This gave Sylvia a chance to take Skelton off very dexterously in a corner.

"I am so glad to see Deerchase inhabited again," she said in her pretty way. "It is pleasant to see the smoke coming out of the chimneys once more."

"It is very pleasant to be there once more," answered Skelton. "After all, one longs for one's own roof. I did not think, the afternoon you paid me that interesting visit, that fifteen years would pass before I should see the old place again."

"Ah, that visit!" cried Sylvia, blushing—blushing for something of which Skelton never dreamed. "I daresay you were glad enough to get rid of me. What inconceivable impertinence I had!"

"Is the crab's bite well yet?"

"Quite well, thank you. And have you remembered that all these years?"

"Perfectly. I never had such a startling adventure with a young lady before or since."

There is something peculiarly charming in the simplicity of people who are something and somebody in themselves. Sylvia realized this when she saw how Skelton's way of saying ordinary things lifted them quite above the ordinary.

How easy and natural he made it all! she thought. And she had expected the great, the grand, the wonderful Skelton to talk like one of Mr. Addison's essays. What a thing it was to travel and see the world, to be sure! That was why Skelton was so easy, and put her so much at ease too.

Skelton, meanwhile, was in no enviable frame of mind. Elizabeth Blair's presence brought back painful recollections. He remembered some foolish threats he had made, and he thought, with renewed wonder and disgust, how he had walked the library floor at Deerchase, night after night, in frightful agitation, afraid to look toward the table drawer where his pistols lay for fear of the horrible temptation to end it all with a pistol shot. She was a sweet enough creature, but no woman that ever lived was worth half the suffering he had undergone for her. After all, though, it was not so much regret for her as it was rage that another man should supplant him. The same feeling waked suddenly and powerfully within his breast. He had always despised Blair, and he found the impulse just as strong as ever—a fellow who spent his days galloping over fields and bawling after dogs preferred to him, Richard Skelton! Nevertheless, he went up and talked pleasantly and naturally to Elizabeth, and inquired, as in duty and politeness bound, after the whole Armistead tribe. Elizabeth was the only one of them left, and Skelton listened gravely while she told him freely some family particulars. He had heard of Hilary and little Mary, and expressed a wish that Hilary should be friends with his own *protégé*, Lewis Pryor. He carefully repeated what he had told Mr. Shapleigh about Lewis; but Mrs. Blair said no word of encouragement, and then dinner was ready, and Skelton went out with Mrs. Shapleigh on his arm.

Sylvia, from motives of prudence, placed herself next him on the other side. Having a humorous knack, Sylvia could very often turn Mrs. Shapleigh's speeches into the safe channel of a joke. At the other end of the table old Tom had beside him Mrs. Blair, who was quite a pet of his. Skelton, with infinite tact, talked as if he had been one of them for the last fifteen years, instead of having been indulging in all sorts of startling adventures abroad while they were vegetating in the country.

The conversation pretty soon got on racing, for the Campdown course was to them their opera, drive, lecture, concert—everything, in short, except the church. Conyers was quite out of this conversation, and was used to being so. Bulstrode likewise found it a bore, and took refuge in gulping down glass after glass of sherry, port, madeira, champagne—any and every thing that came to hand. But he did not enjoy it, although old Tom's cellar was not to be despised. He feared and revered a good woman, and the presence of the ladies took all the taste out of the wine and utterly disconcerted him. He had often said to Skelton: "Curse me, if I can drink comfortably in the presence of women. They are a standing rebuke to such old ruffians as I." Skelton, however, entered into the spirit of the racing talk as if it were of the greatest possible moment. But it was a very delicate one in Blair's presence. Too often had Skelton's colours—black and yellow—come in ahead of Blair's blue jackets and white caps. Skelton and Blair, though, each showed a gentlemanly obliviousness of all this.

Skelton, however, chose to admire a certain colt of old Tom Shapleigh's in a way that made Blair prick up his ears.

"I was walking across your pasture the other day—trespassing, in fact, as I have half forgotten my own land—when I saw that black horse of yours—"

"Alabaster!" cried Sylvia. "He is so black that I could not find a name black enough for him, so I went by the rule of contrary. He is to be my riding horse."

"Yes," groaned old Tom ruefully, "Sylvia says she will have him. He isn't a full thoroughbred, but he has some good blood in him, and I wanted to sell him to somebody, like our friend Blair here, who would find out how much speed there is in him, for he has it unquestionably. But he pleases my girl, and she proposes to keep me out of a snug sum of money in order that she may have a fine black horse to ride. Zounds! Skelton, I'm the most petticoat-ridden man in this county."

"No horse is too good for Miss Shapleigh," answered Skelton, with gallantry; "but if she could be persuaded that another horse, with a coat as smooth and a tail as long as Alabaster's, could carry her, I should like to see a match between him and that long-legged bay of mine—Jaybird, I believe, is his name."

Now Jaybird was the gem of Skelton's stable, and had beaten everything against which she had been matched since her *début*, so that to say that Alabaster possibly had too much foot for her, at once put the black horse in the category of great horses.

"If you can persuade Sylvia to let me sell him, I'd be delighted," said old Tom, with his cheery laugh; "but I'll not answer for your success with her. Women are mysterious creatures, my dear Skelton."

"Undoubtedly they are," replied Skelton gravely.

"Miss Shapleigh wants Alabaster because she wants Alabaster. Nothing could be more conclusive."

"You are quite right," said Sylvia airily; "and when we cease to be mysterious and inconsequent we shall cease to charm."

"Whateley, the old dunderhead, says," began Bulstrode in his deep, rich voice, and with perfect seriousness, "that women are always reaching wrong conclusions from the right premises, and right conclusions from the wrong premises"; at which everybody laughed, and Sylvia answered:

"Then, as our premises are always wrong, our conclusions must be always right. Mr. Skelton, I shall keep Alabaster."

"And my horse, Jaybird, will keep his reputation," said Skelton, with his slight but captivating smile.

The instant Skelton said this Blair was possessed with the desire to own Alabaster. The idea of such a horse being reserved for a girl's riding! It was preposterous. Racing in those days was by no means the fixed and formal affair it is now. It was not a business, but a sport, and as such each individual had great latitude in the way he followed it. Matches were among the commonest as well as among the most interesting forms it took, and a match between Jaybird and Alabaster struck Blair as of all things the most desirable; and in an instant he resolved to have Alabaster, if the wit of man could contrive it. He would show old Tom the weakness, the wickedness, of his conduct in letting himself be wrapped around Sylvia's little finger in that way, and, if necessary, he would try his persuasive powers on Sylvia herself. Women were not usually insensible to his cajolery.

None of the women at the table took much interest in the talk that followed. Mrs. Blair saw instinctively that Blair's passion for horses was being powerfully stimulated by Skelton's presence and talk about the Campdown course, which she secretly considered to be the bane of her life. But she was too proud to let any one—Skelton least of all—see how it troubled her. She even submitted to be drawn into the conversation, which the men at the table were too well bred to leave the women out of, for by little references and joking allusions they were beguiled into it. Blair teased Sylvia about her unfailing faith in a certain bay horse with a long tail, on account of which she had lost sundry pairs of gloves. Mrs. Shapleigh reminded Mr. Shapleigh of a promise he had made her that she should one day drive four horses to her carriage.

"I said four horses to your hearse, my dear," cried old Tom. "I always promised you the finest funeral ever seen in the county, and, by Jove, you shall have it if I have to mortgage every acre I've got to do it!"

"Old wretch!" whispered Elizabeth to Mr. Conyers, while Jack Blair called out good-naturedly:

"I swear, if you hadn't the best wife in the world, you would have been strangled long years ago."

"I daresay I would," answered old Tom frankly. In those robust days gentlemen used stronger language than in the present feeble time, and nobody was at all shocked at either Mr. Shapleigh's remark or Jack Blair's commentary. There was a jovial good humour about old Tom which took the sting out of his most outrageous speeches. But as the talk about racing flowed on, Elizabeth Blair grew paler and paler. Jack Blair's fever was upon him, and Skelton, whether consciously or not, was fanning the flame. Skelton said, in a very modest way—for he was too great a man in the community to need to be anything but modest—that his interests in racing being much greater than ever, as he was then on the spot, he should double his subscription to the club. As it was known that his subscription was already large, this created a flutter among the gentlemen.

"Of course I can't double *my* subscription in the debonair manner of Mr. Skelton," said Blair with an easy smile, "but I don't mind saying that I shall raise it very considerably."

At that moment Mrs. Blair caught Skelton's eyes fixed on her pityingly—so she imagined—and it spurred her to show him that she was not an object of commiseration, and that Jack Blair had no domestic rod in pickle for him on account of that last speech.

"Now, if you change your mind," she said playfully to her husband, "don't lay it on your wife, and say she wouldn't let you, for here I sit as meek as a lamb, not making the slightest protest against any of these schemes, which, however, I don't pretend to understand in the least."

"My dear," cried Blair, his face slightly flushed with wine and excitement, "don't try to pretend, at this late day, that you do not dragoon me. My subjugation has been county talk ever since that night you slipped out of the garden gate and rode off with me in search of a parson."

A magnetic shock ran through everybody present at this. Blair, in saying it, glanced maliciously at Skelton. *That* paid him back for Oriole beating Miss Betsy, and Jack-o'-Lantern romping in ahead of Paymaster, and various other defeats that his "horse or two" had met with from the black and yellow.

In an instant the talk began again very merrily and promptly. Blair looked audaciously at his ease, but Skelton was not a whit behind him in composure. He turned, smiling, to Sylvia, and said:

"How all this talk must bore you!"

Sylvia felt furious with Blair. They had not asked Skelton there to insult him. Therefore she threw an extra softness into her smile, as she replied:

"It is very nice to talk about something else occasionally. I long to hear you talk about your travels."

"My travels are not worth talking about," answered Skelton in the same graceful way; "but I have some very pretty prints that I would like to show you. I hope you will repeat your interesting visit of some years ago to Deerchase—some time soon."

"You are cruel to remind me of that visit," said Sylvia, with her most charmingly coquettish air. "I have the most painfully distinct recollection of it, even to finding fault with the little yellow room because it was not as fine as the rest of the house."

Skelton concluded that neither a course of travel, a system of education, nor a knowledge of the world were necessary to teach Miss Sylvia how to get into the good graces of the other sex. In the midst of it all, Bulstrode, who heard everything and was constitutionally averse to holding his tongue, whispered to Conyers:

"That speech of Mr. Blair's has ruined him—see if it has not"; while old Tom Shapleigh growled *sotto voce* to himself, "This comes of the madam's damnable mixing people up."

There was no more real jollity after this, although much affected gaiety; nor was the subject of racing brought up again. Presently they all went to the drawing room, and cards and coffee were brought. In cutting for partners, Sylvia and Skelton played against Blair and Bulstrode. Everybody played for money in those days, and there were little piles of gold dollars by each player. Blair was a crack whist player, but luck was against him. Besides, he had had an extra glass or two of wine, and the presence of Skelton was discomposing to him; so, although the stakes were small, he managed to lose all the money he had with him. Sylvia could not but admire the exquisite tact with which the rich man accepted the winnings from the poor man. Skelton gave not the smallest hint that any difference at all existed between Blair and himself, and Blair lost his money with the finest air in the world. As for Skelton, he had always hated Blair, and that speech at dinner warmed his hatred wonderfully, for Skelton could forgive an injury, but not an impertinence. Any want of personal respect towards himself he ranked as a crime deserving the severest punishment.

Towards eleven o'clock the party broke up. Blair had made a mortal enemy, he had drank too much wine, he had distressed his wife, offended his hosts, and lost all his money. Bulstrode and Conyers had been bored to death—Bulstrode because he was all for drink and the classics, Conyers because it was against his conscience to take part in jovial dinner parties. Skelton was furiously angry in spite of his invincible coolness and self-possession. Sylvia was vexed. Old Tom was sardonically amused. Only Mrs. Shapleigh congratulated herself, as the last carriage drove off, with:

"Well, the dinner was a great success. I never saw people enjoy themselves more in my life!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE very first and most lasting impression made upon Lewis Pryor's boyish mind was that a subtile difference existed between him and every other boy he had ever known in his life. At the first glance the difference would seem to have been altogether in Lewis's favour, for he always had a plenty of pocket money, and a pony to ride, and a servant to wait on him; but, being a very healthy-natured, honest-hearted boy, he regarded these things with admirable indifference, and instinctively rated them at their true value, which was small. In fact, he came, in the course of his boyish experiences, to hate these distinctions in his favour, as he imagined sometimes that it accounted for the shyness of other boys towards him. From his very earliest recollection there had been this strange and mystifying avoidance, and the boy's heart swelled and his eyes filled with tears whenever he thought of it. Not only was it strange, but it was cruelly undeserved, for he felt himself worthy of respect. He had never told a lie in his life, and such boyish naughtinesses as he had been guilty of were merely the ordinary lapses of impetuous young creatures. But poor Lewis was perforce a model boy, for it is tolerably hard for a boy to get in mischief by himself. Lewis, gazing with melancholy eyes at others of his own age, would feel, with a tightening at his heart, that he would cheerfully give his pony and all his fine belongings to be one with those merry, happy fellows. He remembered dimly his mother—a gentle creature who lavished tenderness upon him; his father—Thomas Pryor, the tutor—a tall, thin, spectacled man; and they all lived very quietly somewhere in the country in England. But even then he had no playmates. Then he remembered quite distinctly his father and his mother both dying, and Bulstrode and Bob Skinny being there and taking him to Skelton. Lewis was then about five years old. After that came a dreary existence of splendid suites of rooms in foreign hotels, where he and Bulstrode were usually waiting for Skelton and Bob Skinny to turn up, when they would all go on to some other splendid suite of rooms in another place, all equally dreary to the lonely boy. Bulstrode was his guardian, and was supposed to be his tutor, and Lewis did his lessons with tolerable regularity. But he had a little store of books—some old romances, dear to every boy's heart, and some of Scott's novels, which were coming out, and a few other imaginative books, which he devoured with insatiate delight. Sometimes, with one of these darling dog's-eared volumes, he could be perfectly happy, lying on the rug before the fire, with his dog Service poking his cold nose affectionately into his face, or flat on his back in the summer time, with the dog on the grass near him, and the trees murmuring softly overhead. For want of other companionship he made a friend and confidant of

Service; and the two would exchange queer confidences, and understood each other as only a boy and a dog can. But more than the dog—even more than his cherished romances—Lewis's most beloved possessions were certain books inscribed "Thomas Pryor, M. A.," and a miniature of his father—a lanky person, as unlike Lewis's dark, clear-cut little face as could be imagined—and a quaint picture in black and white of his mother. But he thought of her so often and so much that he had in his mind's eye a perfect portrait of her. Bulstrode was always ready enough to talk to the boy about his father and mother, but Lewis soon found that Bulstrode's talk amounted to nothing at all, as he had seen but little of either Mr. or Mrs. Pryor. As for Skelton, Lewis could not make him out. He was always kind, always indulgent, and Lewis was quite sharp enough to see that, however Bulstrode might be his guardian, Skelton had the real authority over both Bulstrode and himself. But there was a perfect formality between them. The boy remembered, though, once when he was ill, that Skelton scarcely left him day or night. He always dined with Skelton, and at dinner had one very small glass of wine, after which he might have been expected to leave the table. Occasionally after dinner Skelton would thaw, and would talk to the boy in a way that quite charmed him, telling him of Skelton's own boyhood and his travels. When they came to Virginia, Lewis found the new country more like his faintly remembered English home than he could express, and was a thousand times happier than he had been in the splendid lodgings where so much of his boyhood had been passed. He liked much better riding over the country on his pony than taking a tiresome canter in a public park; Service and himself had much jollier times in the woods and fields than in prim city gardens. And then the negroes were so amusing, and called him "Little Marse" so obsequiously, and he had a boat to sail on the river. This last gave him the most acute and intense pleasure. Skelton, for the first time in his life, taught him something in teaching him to sail the boat.

"Now, Lewis," Skelton said, the first morning the boat was put into the water, "I foresee that you will live in this boat, and as you will no doubt be upset dozens of times, and be caught in squalls and all sorts of accidents, the only thing to do is to teach you to depend upon yourself. The river is not more than fifteen feet deep anywhere, except in the channel, and with ordinary intelligence and care nothing worse ought to happen to you than a good wetting once in a while. The boat is staunch. I myself watched Jim, the wheelwright, making it, and gave him the dimensions"—for the boat had been built at Deerchase—"and the sail is quite large enough for it"—Lewis did not agree with this last, as his ambition was to have the smallest boat and the biggest sail on the river—"and if you are drowned it will be your own fault."

Lewis was wonderfully apt at learning anything, and Skelton, in his quiet way, showed an excellent knack of teaching. Every day, for a week or more, the two were out in the boat together upon the bright river glowing in the August sunshine. Lewis often wondered if Skelton were not bored as they sailed up and down the river, and then beyond out into the bay, Skelton sitting in the stern, with a book in his hand, reading when he was not showing Lewis how to manage the boat. It puzzled the boy because there was usually such a distance, so much reserve between them. More than once Lewis caught Skelton's black, expressive eyes fixed on him with a look that was almost fondness, and at such moments the boy's heart would thrill with a strange emotion. He had often thought that he would ask Skelton some time about his father and mother, and what better opportunity could he have than when sailing together for hours upon the blue water? But he never did it. In spite of Skelton's interest, and his evident desire to secure Lewis from danger by making him a good sailor, the barrier remained. In a very short while, though, Lewis mastered the whole science of a sailboat, with one exception. Nothing could induce him to take the sail down until a squall was actually upon him, and in consequence of this he got into the water several times unnecessarily. But he was a coolheaded fellow, and a good swimmer besides, so that his various upsets did him no harm. Skelton, on these occasions, would send for him and give him lectures upon his foolhardiness, which Lewis would receive respectfully enough, saying "Yes, sir," every time Skelton paused. But when the door was closed Skelton would sigh, and smile too, and say to himself, "There is no frightening the fellow."

There was but one boy in the neighbourhood near Lewis's age. This was Hilary Blair, a handsome, fair-haired, freckle-faced boy, who began the acquaintance with a sturdy contempt for Lewis's prowess. Hilary was a year older than Lewis, and a heavier and stouter boy. But at the first personal encounter between the two young gentlemen, which was precipitated by a dispute over a game of marbles in the main road, Lewis showed so much science in the manly art, that Hilary was knocked out ignominiously about the fourth round. Hilary displayed excellent good sense in the affair. He got up with a black eye, but an undaunted soul.

"Look here," he said, "you've taken lessons of some sort."

"Yes," responded Lewis, shamefacedly, remembering that he had had lessons of all sorts—boxing, fencing, dancing, riding, everything, in short—while this country gentleman's son knew nothing of many of these things; "but if you want to, I'll teach you all I know, and then"—here the fighting instinct in the boy cropped out—"I'll lick you just as easy as I do now."

"I reckon you won't," answered Hilary coolly, and it turned out that he was right; for, with the addition of such scientific instruction as Lewis could impart, the two boys were very evenly matched in their future encounters, which were purely friendly and in the interests of sport.

The boys became fond of each other in a surreptitious way, for Hilary never came to see Lewis, and an instinctive delicacy kept Lewis from going to Newington. But they met on the river, out fishing, and in the woods setting their hare-traps, and they exchanged whispers during church-time.

On Sundays Lewis sat alone in one of the great square high-backed pews, which still remained in the old colonial church of Abingdon. That unlucky singularity of luxury which was the bane of poor Lewis's life actually followed him to church, for Skelton's was the only upholstered pew in the church; and instead of the faded moreen curtains of the other pews, when they were curtained at all, there was a fine purple-silk drapery, behind which the lonely boy sat forlornly. He was the only person who went to church regularly from Deerchase. Bulstrode scoffed at the notion, and Skelton alleged usually that he was too busy. Once in a great while, though, he would saunter into church about the second lesson. Conyers, who feared no man, not even Skelton, would stop deliberately in the midst of the sermon as a rebuke to Skelton. Skelton, however, would be perfectly unmoved by it, as well as by the hundreds of curious eyes bent upon him, and would walk down the aisle with his inimitable grace and a half smile on his lips. Conyers, though, by that strange contrariety which seems to govern human affairs, found his best supporters in Skelton and Bulstrode, whom he expected to be his most powerful foes. So far from antagonising Conyers on account of the public rebuke administered upon his tardiness, Skelton respected him for it, and never failed to speak to the parson politely before all the people as they gossiped in the churchyard. It was not Skelton's way to withhold the meed of justice due any man, and he saw at a glance that the stern, scruple-ridden, conscientious moralist had a very hard time with his merry, free-handed, pleasure-loving congregation—the pastor intolerant of pleasure, the flock intolerant of pain.

As for Bulstrode, Conyers's sad heart had glowed when he first heard of the advent of this great scholar in the county. Perhaps here was light at hand. But the very first sight of Bulstrode was enough for him. Bulstrode's guzzling of liquor, his unbridled license of tongue, were repelling to a natural born ascetic and enthusiast. But Bulstrode was instantly attracted by the parson with the distressed eyes, which always seemed to be looking for something which they never could find. He pursued the acquaintance, and actually tracked Conyers to his lair in the tumble-down rectory. Here Bulstrode would sit for hours, clawing his unkempt hair, and drinking innumerable cups of tea out of a cracked teapot from sheer force of habit. He talked on every imaginable subject, and poured out the stores of his learning lavishly. But he never touched, in the remotest degree, upon religion. Conyers found out, though, that Bulstrode was deeply skilled in that science called theology, and at last the impulse came to unburden his mind and heart, which Bulstrode had long foreseen. They were sitting, one night soon after their acquaintance began, in the shabby rectory study, when Conyers made his confession—telling it all recklessly, his sallow face glowing, his deep eyes burning. Bulstrode heard patiently, even that greatest grievance of all to Conyers—the unwillingness of people to *think* upon the great affair of religion, and their perfect willingness to accept anything rather than to bestow consideration or thought upon it.

"And do you imagine," asked Bulstrode gravely, stopping in the midst of his tea-drinking, "that religion is an intellectual exercise?"

Poor Conyers admitted that he thought it had an intellectual side.

"So it has, so it has; but it has a great emotional side too," answered Bulstrode; "that's where the women are nearer right than men think. The Christian religion undertakes to make a human being better, but it doesn't pretend to make him wiser or happier—or only incidentally; so you see, it must work in the heart of man as in the brain. And I tell you, my clerical friend, that the great defect in all the other systems I've studied—and I know 'em all—is that they are meant for thinkers, and that leaves out nine tenths of the human race. The intellectual side of man's relation to the Great First Cause was worked out long ago by those clever old Greeks. All these modern fellows have been threshing over old straw."

Conyers was surprised at this, and said so. It seemed to him that men who dared to meddle with so vast a subject must be of gigantic strength and heroic mould. Through the mists of his own ignorance and inexperience their figures loomed large, but when he expressed this in halting language, Bulstrode shouted with laughter.

"You think a man must be a second Plato to start a new philosophic system—a new religion, in fact! Why, look you, parson, most undergraduates have doubts about a Great First Cause even; and there are monstrous few university men who don't expect to make a new religion some time or other. They have the disease, like measles or whooping-cough, and get over it and are better afterwards."

Conyers had an idea that among men of true learning the Christian religion was treated as a lot of old women's fables, while all systems of philosophy were regarded with the utmost respect. This, too, he expressed to Bulstrode.

"Don't know, I'm sure, how it is in this queer country," answered Bulstrode, pouring himself out a ninth cup of tea, "but, comparing things according to their size, the biggest system is small compared with that enormous fact of Christianity. Mind, I ain't a Christian myself, though I lean that way, and when I'm drunk and my mind works rapidly, and I see the relations of things better, I lean that way still more; for, know you, Wat Bulstrode drunk is a better man than Wat Bulstrode sober."

If this was meant as a hint for Conyers to produce something stronger than tea, it failed of its object, for not even to make Bulstrode talk like a Christian, would Conyers so far outrage his conscience as to give liquor to a man already too fond of it. Bulstrode really threw out the remark more as a test of the man than a hint, but when Conyers refused the bait a strange glitter came into Bulstrode's dull eyes. Here was that honest man, whose untarnished integrity was like the sun at noonday. Bulstrode, in admiration for this, conceived the idea of establishing in Conyers a sincere belief of Christianity; for, half-educated, starved spiritually, and the prey of scruples that were really doubts, Conyers scarcely knew where he stood. So, then, the extraordinary spectacle was presented of a man little better than a heathen preaching the gospel to a man after God's own heart. Bulstrode was fully sensible of the grotesqueness of the thing, but all disposition to laugh was checked by the sublime earnestness with which Conyers followed him. Bulstrode marshalled with singular power and precision all the arguments in favour of the immortality of the soul, beginning with Plato. He then argued profoundly and subtly in favour of a revealed religion. He pointed out all the weak spots in the various substitutes for religion that had been offered in various ages, and laid bare their defects mercilessly. He sat until late in the night talking, Conyers's eyes all the time growing less and less sombre.

"Now," said Bulstrode, getting up toward midnight, "I've given you all the weapons I have, and taught you how to thrust and parry the best I know how; and, hang me, parson, I've almost argued myself into being a Christian too while I've been trying to convert you!"

Conyers smiled involuntarily as he looked at Bulstrode. There was nothing apostolic in that bulky figure and careless, dissipated face.

Bulstrode went back to Deerchase, and complained next morning that he had been kept up late the night before labouring with Conyers to make him a Christian.

Conyers, however, felt that he had been more helped by this boozy heathen than by all the theologians he had ever met with in his life.

Meanwhile Skelton and his affairs continued to be of prodigious interest among the county people, who regarded him as their local prodigy. There was, of course, great speculation about his wife's fortune, and much indignation expressed that it could not be bestowed upon some of the numerous young women who would have presided so admirably at Deerchase. The universal conviction was that Skelton would never marry, but, in the strange event that he did, conjecture ran wild as to what would become of the money.

Some said it went to found a great charity hospital somewhere; others, that it returned to the late Mrs. Skelton's family; others still, that, Mrs. Skelton having quarrelled with her relations, they would get none of it, but that it would go to Skelton's next of kin, which, wonderful to say, were Elizabeth Blair and her children; but everybody was agreed in thinking that, before Skelton would see the Blairs benefitted by him, he would turn his back on Helen of Troy could she come back to earth. However, the solution seemed far enough off. It was perfectly well known that the late Mrs. Skelton had put an embargo of some sort upon her place being filled, and they would have to wait until Skelton, who was in the perfection of physical health, should be laid in his grave before the mystery would be solved.

Skelton had come home in the early summer, and, although he had been formally called upon by all the gentry in the county, including Blair, as soon as he arrived, and the visits had been returned, but little had been seen of him. Even when the autumn meeting of the Jockey Club had come off, and when all the people from four counties had assembled and Skelton's horses had carried everything before them, Skelton himself had scarcely appeared on the course at all. The truth was he was making a desperate effort to work. He shut himself up every day in the library, and actually got some little way upon his Introduction, but in a very short while a strange and irritating torpor seized upon him mentally. He had no distractions—he had all his books close by him, his notes tabulated; the whole thing was ready to his hand. The hand, though, refused to work; the mind refused to drive the hand. Skelton found he did as little in the scholastic retirement which he had adopted as in the whirl of cities.

He turned to racing as a faint and unsatisfying distraction. He had had the pleasure of beating Blair all along, even at the autumn meeting; he had had the savage enjoyment of knowing that Blair was as unlucky as usual when pitted against him. Skelton's own secret dissatisfaction with himself fanned his resentment against Blair. He turned feverishly to the only thing that interested him—the determination to make Jack Blair know what it was to oppose Richard Skelton. Blair's imprudent speeches, his constant reminders of the why and wherefore of Skelton's rivalry, were not lost on him, and men of his type are always dangerous to trifle with.

Skelton's doubled subscription to the Jockey Club had had a wonderful stimulating effect upon that institution, and it also caused Mrs. Blair to sign her name to a bit of paper which enabled Blair to raise some money, not only for his own increased subscription, but for that horse of old Tom Shapleigh's which Skelton himself had professed to be afraid of. If once a match could be brought about between Alabaster and Jaybird, Blair, who was irrepressibly sanguine, believed that he could wipe out all old scores between them. And, of course, he could buy the horse—old Tom had not seriously meant that

Sylvia was to have for a riding nag a horse that could beat Jaybird. Blair thought that raising a certain sum of money, which was in effect an extravagant price, must certainly buy Alabaster. But he had to go through with some unpleasant processes before raising that money. He was terribly hard up at that time, and one of the most necessary conditions was the signing of his wife's name to a bit of paper that to him represented Alabaster, money, coming out ahead of Skelton—everything, in short.

When he went after Elizabeth to sign that paper she was sewing together the leaves of Hilary's Latin grammar, and wishing she could buy some new books that the boy needed—for she taught him herself, under the womanly pretense that they might thereby save up money for his university expenses. But she knew in her heart of hearts that no money was saved or thought of being saved. Only her pride was saved by that subterfuge. The drawing-room at Newington where she sat was very unlike the splendid drawing-rooms at Deerchase or the gaudy show-rooms at Belfield. It was large, plain, and old-fashioned. The mahogany furniture was scanty, and the ornaments consisted of those daubs of family portraits which all Virginians possess. It was a gloomy afternoon early in October, and neither the room nor anything in it looked cheerful. Blair came in whistling, and stated the case to Elizabeth. As she had brought him no fortune, it seemed ungracious in her to refuse him that which was his own, but she thought of Hilary, and her heart sank. Nevertheless, she signed the paper with the quill pen that Blair cut for her with his penknife. When asking her to make the sacrifice for him he did not insult her by any endearments; there were certain fine points of delicacy about him which well pleased her woman's soul. He profoundly respected the love between them, and would have scorned to use it directly as a means of wheedling anything out of her. But when her name was signed, he tipped her chin up and kissed her with ineffable tenderness.

"By heaven, my girl," he said, "you deserve a better husband than I have ever made you! But you could never find one that loves you half as much."

This gave Elizabeth a chance to air a grievance which she had been cherishing ever since the dinner at Belfield. Mrs. Blair was an uncommonly level-headed woman, and if any one had suggested a doubt of her husband to her, nothing could have exceeded her righteous resentment towards the suggestor. But there never had been a time in all their married life that Mrs. Blair had not fancied Blair's admiration fixed upon some girl in the county, who nine times out of ten bored him to death, and Mrs. Blair was always ready with a few tears and a reproach or two on the subject of these imaginary injuries.

"Yes," she said, withdrawing with an offended air from his encircling arm, "you can say these things to me now, but ever since that night at Belfield, when you never took your eyes off Sylvia Shapleigh, you have been thinking a great deal too much about her."

"Elizabeth," said Blair solemnly, "you are a fool," and then he suddenly burst out laughing—a genuine laugh, inspired by the perfect absurdity of the thing.

"And you won't deny it?" asked Elizabeth, trying feebly to maintain her position.

"Of course not," answered Blair, becoming serious. "If you were a man I should knock you down. As you are a woman, I can't, but I decline to take any notice of what you say. This is the seventeenth girl, I believe, that you have accused me of making eyes at."

Elizabeth condescended to smile at this, and harmony was in a fair way to be restored between them. But after a moment Elizabeth said:

"There is something else, though, which troubled me that night. It was at the dinner table."

Blair knew in an instant that she meant his increased subscription to the Jockey Club, but he asked what she meant.

"Can you ask me?" replied Elizabeth.

"The devil I can," cried Blair, dropping at once into the ordinary, every-day, vexed-husband's tone. "Look here, Elizabeth, didn't you encourage me?"

"What could I do," answered his wife with a piteous smile, "with Richard Skelton looking on and pitying me?"

"And what could *I* do, with Skelton challenging me in every tone of his voice and look of his eye? Don't I know that Miles Lightfoot has got his orders to ruin me at any cost? And do you think that a man would quietly draw out and yield the field to another man under the circumstances? No, Elizabeth, I beat Skelton in the race for you, and I'll beat him again on the Campdown course. And it isn't so hard as you think. You know that black colt Alabaster, of old Tom Shapleigh's? Well, that colt is more than three fourths thoroughbred—he has a strain of blood in him that goes straight back to Diomed. Now, that three fourths thoroughbred can beat any thoroughbred in Skelton's stable; and Skelton himself said so in effect the night of that confounded dinner, and I'm going to have that horse. I shall have him with this money that you have enabled me to raise, and which I regard as a gift from you."

Blair kissed her again—he certainly knew how to express his thanks. Elizabeth had heard the story about Alabaster and Diomed before.

"But I thought you said Mr. Shapleigh wouldn't sell him?"

"He *shall* sell him, by George!" cried Blair violently, and bringing his fist down on the mantel. "Elizabeth, you can't imagine how the desire to own that horse has taken possession of me. You make yourself jealous about a lot of pink-faced girls that I never looked at twice, and, if you only knew it, your real rival is Alabaster. I swear I am in love with that horse! I dream about him at night. I never saw such quarters in my life—so strong, so sinewy, yet so light! And in the daytime, as I ride by the pasture and see him roaming around, not half attended to, it maddens me that such a creature should not be more appreciated. If I had him I could pay off all the mortgages on this place. I could send Hilary to school, and have a governess for Mary. I could give you a new carriage, and, better than all, I could beat Skelton at his own game."

He spoke with a strange fierceness, he so debonair and full of careless good humor. Elizabeth looked at him in amazement. In all their fifteen years of married life she had never seen this trait in him. He was so intense, so wrought up over the horse, that she was glad it was only a horse that excited him. Suppose it had been one of those pink-faced girls that Blair spoke of so contemptuously, but who liked his dashing manners and captivating ways only too well, Mrs. Blair thought.

"But suppose, for an instant, Mr. Shapleigh won't sell him," persisted Elizabeth.

"But he *shall* sell him!" shouted Blair for the second time. "What does he want with him—to drive him to old lady Shapleigh's chaise? I assure you he talks about Sylvia's wanting to keep the horse as a riding horse. It made me grind my teeth. It would be cruel—yes, cruel, Elizabeth, if I didn't own that horse!"

Elizabeth was startled; she said nothing more about Alabaster, and Blair went off with his hands in his pockets toward Belfield, and in a little while she saw him leaning on the fence that divided the two places, as the lands came together at the river, eying the black horse that browsed about in the pasture in the late October afternoon.

The red-brown pasture-land glowed in the setting sun, and the masses of gorgeous sumac that bordered the field made great dashes of colour in the landscape. A worm fence divided the two plantations, and upon this fence Blair leaned, meditatively watching the horses as they champed about the field. Elizabeth, who was far-sighted, could see him perfectly well, his stalwart and somewhat overgrown figure outlined against the twilight sky. A negro boy came through the field whistling, and singing, to drive the horses into the stable lot at Belfield. He shied a stick at Alabaster to make him move on. At that Blair sprang over the fence, and, seizing the boy, shook him so violently that Elizabeth was frightened, thinking he might really be harmed by Blair in his rage.

He came home moodily, and told Elizabeth that he believed he could kill any creature that hurt an animal as valuable as Alabaster. Elizabeth believed him, after what she had just seen.

Next morning Blair went over to bargain for the horse. Old Tom was disinclined to sell, and as he talked Blair grew paler and paler. At last old Tom declared that Sylvia might decide. He had told her the horse was hers. He didn't care for the money particularly, although the horse was certainly worth a good price, and was very speedy, but if Sylvia chose to part with him it was all right.

Sylvia, on getting a message from her father, tripped down to the stable lot, where the two men were talking. The morning was warm and bright, even for the bright October season, and Sylvia wore a white dress and a large black hat. She had a wild-rose bloom in her cheek, and was altogether uncommonly pretty that morning. Blair was usually very observant and appreciative of women's looks, but no woman that lived could have taken his attention off from Alabaster at that moment. Old Tom stated the case, and then walked away, laughing.

"You and Sylvia settle it between you," he cried. "If she chooses to sell him I'll take what you offered me. If not, she wouldn't let me sell him for the whole of Newington plantation."

"I wouldn't either, if he were my property," answered Blair, with a smile upon his handsome ruddy face that had, however, quite a strange look upon it.

"Now, Miss Sylvia, can't you let me have him?" he asked, as soon as old Tom was out of the way.

Sylvia did not at all take in Blair's intense desire to own the horse. "Why, Mr. Blair," she said pettishly, "*I* want the horse. He is a splendid riding horse, and I have looked forward to having him for such a long time."

Blair threw up his hands in a kind of despair. What creatures women were! Could they ever be made to understand the great affairs of life? Sylvia, who was quick of apprehension, caught in a moment the look which revealed an unsuspected turn in Blair's character. His expression was desperate.

"But—but—do you *want* him very much?" suddenly asked Sylvia.

"Want him!" cried Blair. "Great God!"

Sylvia looked at him in dumb amazement. Blair's features were working—he seemed to be asking for something as dear to him as his own children.

"I don't think you know how much I want this horse," he said, with furious entreaty in his voice and his eyes. "This horse is worth everything to me, and without him life itself is worth nothing to me, because I am undoubtedly ruined unless I can get a horse to beat Skelton's Jaybird. Alabaster can do it. I don't know of any other horse that can. It is not only that I may recoup what I have lost—for I tell you I'd risk my own soul almost on Alabaster's coming under the wire first with Jaybird—but there is feud between Skelton and me, feud such as you never dreamed of. I hate him, and he hates me."

Sylvia hesitated for a moment. Blair hung upon her words. She was serious enough now. Her lips moved once or twice as she patted the grass with her foot. Of course, it was all over, that childish romance about Skelton. She was now a young woman nearly out of her twenties, and he was nearing his fortieth birthday; and, besides, she had nothing to do with any rivalry on the turf between him and Mr. Blair, nor did she believe that Alabaster was as certain to carry everything before him as Blair thought. But—but—she recoiled from being the means of a possible defeat to Skelton. She knew well enough that there was great feeling on both sides in these matters between Blair and Skelton, and she knew Skelton to be unforgiving to the last degree. She raised her clear grey eyes to Blair's face, but the expression on it made her turn a little pale. It was not only fiercely entreating, but it had a menace in it. Blair, indeed, felt a savage impulse to seize this slight creature and actually force her to let him have the horse. But the pity that dwells in every woman's heart now rose in Sylvia's. She felt so sorry for him—he had told her he would be ruined if he did not get Alabaster; so, after a few moments, painful on both sides, Sylvia suddenly held out her hand, and said:

"Yes, you may have him."

Blair seized her hands and kissed them. His face changed to something like what it usually was. Sylvia's eyes were full of tears; she realised that he was really ruined then, although Blair spoke of Alabaster as destined to prevent it. Blair was so eager, that he had to take the horse home with him. Sylvia walked slowly back to the house through the old-fashioned garden, while Blair, in triumph, rode home, leading his treasure. He made Hilary go with the horse to the stable, while he went in the house. He felt the need of rest—he, this great, strong country squire felt a nervous reaction after the singular excitement of the morning.

"Elizabeth," he said to his wife, "you accused me of looking at Sylvia Shapleigh too often. Let me tell you something. I never felt an impulse of violence towards a woman in my life until this morning. But when I saw her standing before me so unconcerned and smiling, and making up her mind so deliberately about the horse, I declare to you, I longed to—to seize her and throttle her until she came to her senses and agreed to let me have the horse. There is destiny in this. I wouldn't so have longed for the creature if there were not something quite out of the usual run of events connected with him."

Elizabeth looked at her husband and said nothing. How unintelligible is human nature, after all! Here, this man, to whom she had been married fifteen years, suddenly developed an intensity, a savagery, that she had no more suspected than she suspected a whirlpool in the placid river that began its course up in the green marshes and made its broad and shallow way to the sea. And it came to her again and again, Suppose it had been not a horse, but a human being that had aroused this vehement desire of possession? It was enough to make her turn pale.

"And," continued Blair, with a smile that had something ferocious in it, "I shall beat Skelton again through a woman. Imagine, he might fall in love with Sylvia Shapleigh, and then find that she had furnished me with the means to be revenged on him! Perhaps Sylvia is in love with him, and that's why she didn't want to let me have the horse."

"But he can't marry, you know, without giving up his wife's fortune, and that he would be most unlikely to do," said Elizabeth; and she adroitly got Blair off the subject of Skelton, and Skelton's plans and his horses, and horses in general, and Alabaster in particular, on to some less exciting topic.

CHAPTER VIII.

SYLVIA went back into the house, troubled in mind, and all that day the thought followed her that she had probably brought about Skelton's defeat by what she had done. There was no question of a match between Jaybird and Alabaster that autumn; but in the spring—however, much might happen in the meantime, for so Sylvia consoled herself, and heartily wished that Alabaster had never been seen or heard of.

There had not been much intercourse between Belfield and Deerchase in the weeks that Skelton had been at home. He had promptly called after the dinner, and it was understood that he intended giving a large ball some time or other, but beyond a few of the gentlemen of the county nobody had been entertained by Skelton at all.

Sylvia could not keep her eyes from wandering towards Deerchase, for Skelton was a man who always aroused interest, and then her tender woman's heart was very soft towards Lewis Pryor.

It was generally agreed that there was a mystery about the boy, and, for no better reason than this, his existence was ignored by the county gentry, who paid formal visits to Deerchase, but who did not take their sons with them if they happened to have boys of Lewis's age. Sylvia saw him every day—sailing his boat on the river, fishing sometimes, or lying down under the trees with his dog—always alone. Once or twice she met him in the road and stopped and talked with him. The boy was won by her grace and charming manners, and admired her shyly while answering her questions, with his black eyes fixed on the ground. After meeting her two or three times he grew bolder, and actually one day left at Belfield a bouquet of golden rod, with his compliments scrawled in a large, boyish hand on a card. Mrs. Shapleigh, passing through the hall as Lewis, blushing very much, handed the bouquet in, seized upon it and carried it off in triumph to Sylvia.

"Just look, my dear! No doubt it came from Richard Skelton, poor fellow! He is just eating his heart out because he can't ask you to marry him, but still he likes to pay you these delicate attentions. Wild flowers, too—so much sentiment!"

"Mamma," said Sylvia sharply, "please be reasonable. Look at this: they are from Lewis Pryor, that black-eyed boy that is Mr. Bulstrode's ward."

"And not from Richard Skelton! Dear, dear! Do throw the things out, Sylvia; they are not worth houseroom. And, my dear, there is some mystery about that boy, and you'd better not have anything to do with him."

"Poor little Lewis! The only mystery that I see about him is that he is young and lonely and wants friends. I never saw a more winning boy in my life."

Something in the gift touched Sylvia. She realised, with a smile, that Lewis had probably endured agonies of bashfulness before and after sending his bouquet. She wrote him a pretty little note, and sealed it with a motto such as was the fashion in those days. Bob Skinny presented the note that night at the dinner table to Lewis with a great flourish.

"Miss Sylvia Shapleigh, sah, sont you dis heah billy-doo." Bob Skinny had not been to Paris for nothing, and interlarded his conversation with such scraps of French as he could muster.

Lewis, turning very red under Skelton's eye, opened the note and read it, afterwards putting it into his pocket with studied carelessness. Glancing up, he saw Skelton's gaze, usually so serious, fixed, half laughingly, upon him.

"You have the advantage of me, Lewis," said Skelton, smiling; "I have never been honoured with a note from Miss Shapleigh."

"Perhaps, sir," answered Lewis, after a pause, "you never sent Miss Shapleigh any flowers."

Skelton was secretly delighted with the aptness of the boy's reply, and remarked pleasantly:

"That is true. You seem, however, to have got the start of me in that respect too."

Lewis, for the first time in his life before Skelton's face, burst out laughing. Skelton started with surprise. He scarcely knew the boy possessed a laugh so fresh, so merry, so boyish. Then, blushing violently, Lewis relapsed into silence, but those few words and the laugh had in some way shown him that the barrier between Skelton and himself was not so icy after all.

Bulstrode teased the boy unceasingly about his bouquet, but Lewis was not to be turned from his liking by teasing. Soon after the bouquet episode he wrote a note in his best hand and carefully copied from the Complete Letter-writer, inviting Sylvia to take a sail in his boat. Sylvia accepted, and the next morning she was promptly on hand as the boat touched the wharf at Belfield.

Lewis was delighted. It was his first taste of responsibility, and the idea that this charming creature should trust herself with him in his boat seemed to make a man of him at once. Skelton, glancing out of the library window, saw Lewis sitting in the stern by Sylvia, who was steering, while Service, the dog, sat between them, his paws on Lewis's knee.

Sylvia might have brought her whole battery of charms to bear on Skelton with less effect than by her simple kindness to Lewis. Skelton watched them as the boat sailed gaily past in the dazzling morning, and something like a blessing on her stirred his heart. He did not wish to be with them; on the contrary, he felt that he could more indulge his pleasure at a distance than if he was present, but he felt a profound and tender gratitude to Sylvia for her kindness to the boy. In the same way he silently but bitterly resented Mrs. Blair's not having once brought or sent Hilary to Deerchase.

The next time he met Sylvia—which was when riding along the road one afternoon—he stopped her, and she was surprised at the cordiality of his greeting.

"My young friend Lewis Pryor seems to have the privilege of your friendship above all of us," he said.

Sylvia smiled, and felt like making a reply similar to Lewis's when Skelton asked him a question of the same sort; but she merely said that Lewis was a very sweet boy, and the friendship of boys was apt to be sincere and disinterested.

"And discerning," added Skelton. "Boys are very astute. I think they lose some of their astuteness when they get to be men."

Young women, as a rule, did not interest Skelton; but he was drawn to study Sylvia, first by her kindness to Lewis, and then by the oddity of the discovery that the daughter of Mrs. Shapleigh could have so much mother-wit as Sylvia undoubtedly had. And then, talking about trifles as their horses stood in the sandy road, under the bare overhanging branches of the linden trees that lined the lane, the talk drifted to the Jockey Club. Skelton had just come from a meeting, and was evidently much interested in the subject.

"I think everybody in the county gets a species of horse madness twice a year," he said, "and it is contagious. I assure you, that beast of mine—Jaybird—takes up an unconscionable amount of my time and attention. And, after all, that black colt which you chose to call Alabaster may make me bite the dust."

Sylvia could not tell whether Skelton hid any real resentment under his careless manner or not, but an impulse seized upon her to tell him all about it.

"You know, perhaps," she said, looking him full in the eyes, "that Alabaster was mine, and I hated the idea of his being whipped and spurred as race horses are; and when papa told me that Mr. Blair wanted him, I quite made up my mind not to part with him. But Mr. Blair came over one morning, and I declare, I never saw such eagerness—"

Sylvia paused. She was getting upon delicate ground; but Skelton helped her out:

"Oh, yes; Blair is a maniac upon the subject of beating my horse. He is scarcely responsible. However, there are pleasanter things to talk about than horse racing. You have never honoured Deerchase yet with that visit you promised me, to look at my pictures."

"Because, whenever I ask papa or mamma to take me, they always say you are busy on your great book, and I must wait for an invitation."

"You shall wait no longer," said Skelton courteously; "come to-morrow—come to-day."

As they parted with a half promise on Sylvia's part about the visit, she cantered briskly down the lane while Skelton rode back slowly to Deerchase. Ah, that book! He had made apologies and excuses to himself for not writing it for fifteen years past. A desperate apprehension of failure haunted him. Suppose all this brilliant promise should come to naught! And it was his sole resource under any circumstances. He was too old, and he had tasted too many pleasures, to make pleasure an object with him any longer. Domestic life he was shut out from, unless he chose to pay a price even more preposterous for it than people imagined; for, although the county was not without information regarding Skelton's affairs, there were some particulars, peculiarly galling to him, that only a few persons in the world knew. Skelton was the last man on earth to submit easily to any restrictions, but those laid upon him by the jealous fondness of the dead woman sometimes made him grind his teeth when he thought of them. Often he would rise from his bed in the middle of the night and walk the floor for hours, tormented with the sense of having been robbed of his personal liberty and of being a slave in the midst of all his power. For the late Mrs. Skelton, who married him from the purest infatuation, so bitterly resented the opposition of her family to her marriage with Skelton, that she determined, even in the event of his marrying again, that they at least should not profit by it. But in carrying out this fine scheme a woman and three lawyers managed to create a complication that was calculated to infuriate any man; and could she have risen from her grave and have known the result of her handiwork, her chagrin would have been only second to Skelton's.

Skelton did not, for a wonder, hate his wife's memory for this. He was singularly just in his temperament, and he only hated the three lawyers, who pocketed each a great fee for making a will that palpably defeated its own object—a not uncommon occurrence. Although he had not fully returned the passionate devotion of his wife, he had yet loved her and felt deeply grateful to her, more for her devotion than her money; for the secret of Mrs. Skelton's devotion had been the knowledge that, after all, Skelton had not married her for her money. Bulstrode always said that Skelton married her to spite her relations. Certain it is, the declaration of the great family to which she belonged, that she never should marry Skelton, did more to precipitate his offer than anything else. Afterwards his kindness to her, his delicacy, and the conviction that he did not know how absolutely she was mistress of her own fortune, deeply impressed her affectionate nature. In her last illness, which came before she had been married six months, the greed, the rapacity, the heartlessness of her own family was in marked contrast to Skelton's delicate reticence. He declined to talk of her money, either to her or her lawyers; he left the room when she asked his wishes; he could not bargain with a creature so young, so tender, and so short a time for this world. But he reaped his reward, only with some results that nobody ever dreamed of, and which made Skelton in his heart denounce the whole tribe of lawyers as dolts, dunderheads, rascals, cheats, frauds, and incapables.

But although he very much doubted whether he ever would have cared to risk the matrimonial yoke again, it was inexpressibly irritating to him to know that he could not, and that everybody knew he could not. He noticed, sardonically, the manœuvring mothers and designing daughters gave faint indications that he was not in the running; and worldly-wise young women would be likely to be shy of his attentions, for they could mean nothing. Skelton gave them no cause to be shy of him, but the whole thing humiliated him. There was that charming Sylvia—so thought Skelton, sitting in the library that afternoon with a book in his hand which he was not reading—she entertained him vastly; but no doubt that fool of a mother had canvassed his affairs and his status, and had put notions in the girl's head.

He was half sorry that he had asked her there, for to-morrow he meant to make a fair start on his book, to which he had so far written only the introduction.

The next day Sylvia and her father came over to luncheon, Mrs. Shapleigh being ill—to Skelton's great joy. Bulstrode rarely came to the table, and never when ladies were present; so there were only Skelton and Lewis Pryor and old Tom Shapleigh and his daughter.

Lewis was delighted to see Sylvia, and showed his pleasure by shy, adoring glances and vivid blushes whenever she smiled at him. Things at Deerchase appeared very grand to Sylvia's provincial eyes, but she seemed to fit easily and gracefully into the surroundings. Skelton had never lacked for charm, and he was impelled to do his best in his own house. Old Tom tried to talk racing once or twice, but Skelton adroitly headed him off. He fascinated Sylvia with his conversation. It was thoroughly unaffected, racy, full of anecdote, and all about things that Sylvia wanted to know. Skelton had been to Abbotsford, and had spent some days under the great man's roof. He had travelled post with Byron, and had walked with Goethe in his garden at Weimar. To a girl at that time and in that part of the world all this was a splendid dream. Sylvia looked at Skelton with new eyes. That brown, sinewy hand had touched Byron's; that musical voice had talked with Scott and Goethe; he had walked over the field of Waterloo, and knew London and Paris like a book. Skelton was pleased and amused with Sylvia's breathless interest—her innocent wonder at many very simple things. Much of it was new to Lewis, and when Sylvia turned to him and said:

"Ah, Lewis! is it not delightful?" Lewis answered:

"Yes, and it is so delightful for us to hear it together."

Lewis was not quite conscious of the meaning of what he said, but a roar from old Tom, and much laughter from Skelton, and Sylvia's retiring behind her fan, made him blush more than ever and abstain from further communications with Sylvia.

After luncheon and the pictures, old Tom would by no means be denied a visit to the stables and Jaybird, so Sylvia was left to the tender mercies of Bob Skinny as cicerone, who showed her the greenhouses and gardens. Lewis kept close to her, and plucked up spirit enough to squeeze her hand whenever he had half a chance, and to offer to take her out in his boat every day if she would go. Bob Skinny was in his glory. He wore a blue coat and brass buttons, and a huge cambric ruffle decorated with cotton lace adorned his shirt-front. If Bob Skinny had had anything whatever to do in the way of work, this style of dress would have been an impossibility; but as he managed to make the other negroes do his work, while he devoted himself to answering Skelton's bell, to the care of his own person, and playing the "fluke," he could afford to be a magnificent coxcomb.

"Now, Miss Sylvy," he began loftily, "of co'se Mr. Skelton an' me is got sumpin' else ter do den to go circumventin' roun' dese heah flowers an' truck. We has got our gre't work on philosophy ter write. Fifteen thousan' books in dat ar libery, Miss Sylvy;

fifteen thousan', ez sho' as I'se Mr. Skelton's vally—not dat I breshes his clo's none, nor black he boots; Jake, he do dat kin' o' demeanin' work."

"But I see you are the butler, Bob," remarked Sylvia, thinking this an astute bit of flattery.

"You is mistaken, miss," answered Bob with dignified tartness. "I is de major domo; Sam Trotter, he de butler. You see, I'se had de adwantages o' trabel, an' I kin read an' wrote, an' play de fluke, an' dem 'complishments is wasted in a butler; but dey is mighty fitten for a major domo, who is quite a 'nother kind o' pusson, Miss Sylvy."

"So I perceive," answered Sylvia hastily, and exchanging looks with Lewis.

"Now, when Mr. Skelton was a-tellin' you dem inwentions o' his'n 'bout Mr. Byrum an' de Duke o' Scott an' Lord Gayety, he didn' tole you dat I wuz 'long too, an' I done play de fluke for ev'y one of 'em; an' dey ev'y one ax Mr. Skelton what he would tooken for me—'kase dey doan' hab nuttin' but white niggers ober d'yar, an' dey all mighty glad ter git er cullud gent'man ter wait on 'em. But Mr. Skelton he tole de Duke o' Scott, 'I wouldn't part wid Bob Skinny for de whole o' yo' ole Rabbitsford.' Dis heah is de truf I'se tellin' you, Miss Sylvy."

"Of course, Bob," remarked Sylvia affably.

"Bob," said Lewis gravely, "tell Miss Sylvia about the Duke of Wellington."

"Hi, little marse, Miss Sylvy she doan' want ter hear nuttin' 'bout de Duke o' Wellington," replied Bob, immensely flattered, but desiring to be pressed.

"Indeed I do, Bob!" cried Sylvia, seating herself in a rustic settee with Lewis, while Bob struck an attitude before her.

"Well, Miss Sylvy, I tell you I doan' think much o' de duke. He what I call po' white trash, 'kase he ain' got no manners; an' I done see de worl', an' I allus knowed a gent'man when I see him. I wuz walkin' long in de park in London one day—dey got a gre't place wid trees an' grass an' flowers, an' dey calls it a park—an' I see de duke a-comin' 'long, walkin' by hisse'f. He was monst'ous homely, an' he clo's warn't no better'n mine, an' I tho't I'd spoke ter him; so I jes' step up, an' I say, 'Sarvant, sah, I'se Mr. Skelton's vally, from Deerchase, Virginny, de bigges' plantation an' de mo'es' niggers—' 'Git out o' my way, feller!' says de duke, wavin' he stick at me. I wuz gwine tell him all 'bout de Skeltons, an' pay him my 'spects, but arter dat I didn' tuk no mo' notice on' him, dough I see him ev'y day stramanadin' in de park. I reckon, ef he had done listen when I say I wuz Mr. Skelton's vally, he'd er been ez perlite ez a dancin' master, 'kase he mus' 'a' knowed all 'bout Mr. Skelton an' Deerchase. But, Miss Sylvy, I doan' keer much 'bout dem gre't folks ober d'yar. You dunno ef dey is de fust families or not. An' ez for dem white niggers dat waits on 'em, I wouldn' demean myse'f to 'sociate wid 'em under no desideratum."

Bob Skinny then branched off into denunciation of the other negroes at Deerchase, to whom he fancied himself as much superior as if he were a being on a higher planet. There was war to the knife between them naturally, which was very much heightened by Bob's being a "backslider." Bob had been in the habit of "gittin' 'ligion" regularly once a year at the revival meetings until Skelton took him to Europe. As the result of his "trabels" he had taken up the notion, which was not entirely unknown among his betters, that it was more elegant and *recherché* to be without a religion than to have one. Consequently, Bob returned full of infinite contempt for the Hard-shell Baptists, the shouting Methodists, and all the other religions that flourished among the negroes.

"You see, Miss Sylvy," he explained argumentatively, "now I done see de worl' an' kin read an' wrote an' play on de fluke, what I want wid dis heah nigger 'ligion? I'se a philosopher." Bob brought this out magnificently. "I say ter dem niggers, 'What is it in 'ligion? Nuttin' 'tall. What is it in philosophy? De truf, de whole truf, an' nuttin' but de truf.' I ain' seen none on 'em yit kin answer my argufyin'."

After a while old Tom and Skelton came into the greenhouse, where Bob was still holding forth and giving the botanical names of the plants according to his own vernacular, but Bob shut up promptly as soon as Skelton appeared. Sylvia's hands were full of flowers, given her by Lewis. The two had got very intimate now, and Lewis wore an air of boyish triumph. It was not worth while for Skelton to offer her any flowers if he had desired, she had so many.

They had walked over from Belfield across the bridge, and when they started to return Skelton and Lewis walked with them, Lewis still hanging about Sylvia, so that Skelton, who had meant to walk home with her, was entirely thrown out. On the way they met Bulstrode lumbering across the lawn with a book in his hand. Sylvia stopped and spoke to him pleasantly. He remained looking after her, watching her slight figure as she went across the bridge, still gallantly escorted by Lewis.

"I wonder if she would have jilted Skelton as Mrs. Blair did," he thought.

CHAPTER IX.

THE days passed on quickly enough at Deerchase, but not very satisfactorily. Skelton took eagerly to the racing scheme, and, with a little diplomacy on each side, a match was arranged for the spring meeting between Jaybird and Alabaster. Skelton himself did not appear at all in the transaction; it was conducted solely between Miles Lightfoot, the factotum, and Blair himself. With superior judgment to Blair, Skelton did not by any means regard the match as settled; he preferred to wait until it was run. But he took the most intense interest in it, and the thought of paying Blair off for his folly and presumption was agreeable enough to him. Then, this new amusement gave him something to do, for the work that he would have done continually eluded him. He spent many solitary hours in the great, beautiful library with piles of books and manuscript before him, and when a knock came at the door he was apt to be found pen in hand, as if hard at work. But many of those solitary hours were spent in a horrible idleness—horrible because he felt the time was slipping by and nothing was being done.

Not even Bulstrode knew of those long days of depression, or that Miles Lightfoot, with his swagger and his continual boasting that Blair was to be driven off the turf altogether, was in the nature of a relief to an overstrained mind. Miles Lightfoot was a continual offense to Bulstrode, who was disgusted at seeing books and papers and everything swept off the library table to make room for racing calendars and all of Miles's paraphernalia.

As for Lewis, his mind seemed to have taken a sudden start. He had been thrown with Skelton as he never had been before in his life, and from a dim wonder what Skelton's position to him was, came another wonder as to his own position at Deerchase.

Apparently nothing could be more fixed or agreeable. The servants called him "little marse," and seemed to regard him as their future master; he had the run of the house, the stables, the gardens, and nobody questioned his right. But Skelton was not only no relation to him, but not even his guardian. And then he had not made friends with any boy in the county, except Hilary Blair, and Hilary never came to Deerchase, nor had he ever been to Newington. Indeed, as Lewis thought, with tears starting to his eyes, the only real friend he had in the world was Sylvia Shapleigh. Her kindness made a powerful impression upon his affectionate nature. He loved her the more because he had so few things to love. He sometimes determined that he would ask Mr. Bulstrode, or perhaps even Mr. Skelton, why he had no boy friends, but he never did it when he thought he would.

Bulstrode had taken a great interest in Mrs. Blair, partly from curiosity about the woman who had dared to jilt Richard Skelton, and partly from a reason connected with that preposterous will of the late Mrs. Skelton—for Elizabeth Blair was Skelton's only near relative. The interest had been followed by a real esteem for her, due chiefly to a remark made quite innocently when Bulstrode went to Newington one evening. Mrs. Blair was teaching Hilary his Latin lesson, while Blair, who was a university man, guyed her unmercifully as he lay stretched out in a great chair.

"When did you learn Latin, my dear madam?" asked Bulstrode, with a benevolent grin.

"Ah, Mr. Bulstrode, I never learned Latin at all," answered Mrs. Blair, with a smile and a blush; "I learned a few nouns and verbs long years ago, and now that I must teach Hilary, I have furbished them up a little for his benefit."

Her modesty pleased Bulstrode, who was disgusted by any assumption of learning.

"Now, my boy," he said to Hilary, "do you like Latin?"

"First rate," answered Hilary sturdily. "Like it better'n any lesson I've got. Wish I could read it like you do, Mr. Bulstrode."

Bulstrode was delighted.

"My dear Mrs. Blair," he cried, turning to her, "you have done more than I could do—you have made the boy like the undying language. If I could only do that with Lewis Pryor! The boy is bright enough—bright enough—but he wants to be reading modern histories and romances all the time."

Mrs. Blair coloured slightly at the mention of Lewis Pryor. She knew all about the surreptitious friendship between the two boys, and if Blair would have allowed it she would have had Lewis at Newington sometimes. But Blair swore it should not be. For want of something better to say, she asked:

"How are you all coming on at Deerchase?"

"Deuced badly," answered Bulstrode, with candid disapproval. "Nothing but the damnable races, morning, noon, and night. Do you know Miles Lightfoot?"

Mrs. Blair gave a little shudder.

"Yes, I know him," she answered.

"The fellow was born a gentleman and bred one, I hear," continued Bulstrode with energy, "but rides for pay in any sort of a race that he can get a mount. I ain't a gentleman myself, Mrs. Blair, but I know one when I see him, and Miles Lightfoot has ceased to be a gentleman these ten years past. Well, he's fairly domiciled at Deerchase. He is in charge of the Deerchase stable. Instead of Bulstrode and the library, Skelton is all for Lightfoot and the stables. Don't know what made our friend Skelton take up this craze, but he's got it, and he's got an object in it."

"What is his object?" timidly asked Mrs. Blair—the boy had gone off then with his book, and was engaged in a good-natured teasing contest with his father. Blair's children adored him, and thought him precisely their own age.

"I'm dashed if I know," cried Bulstrode, rumpling up his shock of grizzly, unkempt hair. "But that he's got an object— Lord, Mrs. Blair, did you ever know Richard Skelton to do anything without an object?"

"It has been a good many years since I knew anything of Richard Skelton," she said, with pretty hypocrisy; at which Bulstrode roared out his great, vulgar, good-natured "Haw! haw! haw!"

"Mr. Blair called at Deerchase when Mr. Skelton returned, and Mr. Skelton has paid me one visit, when he stayed exactly twenty minutes."

But all the time her heart was beating painfully. She knew Skelton's object—it was, to ruin her husband. Bulstrode kept up his haw-hawing.

"You wouldn't marry Skelton, ma'am, and you showed your sense. There are worse men than he in the world, but if I were a woman I'd rather marry the devil himself than Richard Skelton."

"But he got on very well with his first wife, didn't he?" asked Mrs. Blair, with all a woman's curiosity.

"O Lord, yes! She worshipped the ground he trod on. It's the most curious thing, the way human affairs always go contrary. Skelton, although he is a rich man, was disinterestedly loved, because his fortune was nothing to his wife's—and he had no rank to give her. But she was an Honourable in her own right. And, stranger still, I believe he was disinterested in marrying her. I always said he did it to spite her family. She had a lot of toploftical relations—she was related to half the peerage and all the baronetage—and they got to hectoring her about Skelton's attentions, when I do assure you, madam, I don't think he had any notion of falling in love with her. They tried to hector Skelton. Great powers of heaven! You can just imagine how the scheme worked, or rather how it didn't work!" Here Bulstrode winked portentously. "The lady was her own mistress and could control every stiver of her money, and one fine morning she walked off to church and married Skelton without any marriage settlement! When it was done and over, the great folks wanted to make friends with him, but Skelton wouldn't have it at all. He held his own with the best of 'em. One secret of Skelton's power is that he don't give a damn for anybody. Skelton 's a gentleman, you know. Then the poor young woman was taken ill, and her relations got to bothering her with letters about what she was going to do with her money. Mrs. Skelton used to try and talk to Skelton about it—I was with him then—but he would get up and go out of the room when she mentioned the subject. He's a very delicate-minded man where money is concerned. And then she sent for her lawyers, and they made her a will, madam, which she signed, after having made some alterations in it with her own hand. And such a will as it turned out to be! Lord, Lord, Lord!"

Bulstrode rose and walked about the room excitedly. Mrs. Blair watched him breathlessly. Blair had stopped his play with Hilary, and was listening with all his ears. When the string of Bulstrode's tongue was unloosed he usually stopped at nothing. But now he was restrained. He had gone as far as he dared, but he looked hard at Mrs. Blair, and said:

"You are Skelton's nearest relative—ain't you, madam?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Blair, in a low voice. "I am his first cousin—and I am the last of my family."

"Lord, Lord, Lord!" shouted Bulstrode again, then relapsed into silence, and suddenly burst into his great laugh. Mrs. Blair felt uncomfortable and perplexed, and Blair got up and left the room.

Bulstrode said no more of Skelton, and went back to his grievances about the racing, and then took up the Latin grammar again. Mrs. Blair, who had a very just estimate of her own knowledge of Latin, had an inordinately high one of Blair's acquirements in that respect.

"You know, Mr. Bulstrode," she said, "Mr. Blair is really a very fine scholar. He was quite a distinguished Latinist when he was at William and Mary."

Bulstrode sniffed openly at Blair's scholarship and William and Mary.

"Then he ought to teach your boy, ma'am. I swear, Mrs. Blair, it addles my brain sometimes when I see the beauty and splendour of the passion you women bestow on your husbands and children."

Mrs. Blair's face flushed a little, and a beautiful angry light burned in her eyes, as it always did at the slightest implication that Blair was not perfect.

"Luckily for me," she said, with a little arrogant air, "my husband and children are worthy of it. All that I know of unworthy husbands and children is about other women's husbands and children."

"Yes, yes," eagerly assented Bulstrode, and then went off again on the subject of his grievances about Miles Lightfoot and the races, and even that Lewis Pryor was getting too fond of the stables and stayed there too much, and he meant to speak to Skelton about it.

Bulstrode left Mr. and Mrs. Blair under the impression that there was some queer complication connected with the late Mrs. Skelton's money, with which they were mixed up, and it gave rise naturally to much speculation on their part.

They talked it over a great deal, but they had nothing positive to go upon. Elizabeth, womanlike, tried to dismiss it from her mind, and the more so when she saw that Blair was deeply pondering it. At all events, Skelton would keep his own until his death, for neither of them believed he would marry again; and as he was not quite forty—some years younger than Blair himself—it was idle to think too much about what was so far in the future.

Bulstrode was as good as his word about Lewis Pryor, and the very next day made his complaint about Lewis to Skelton.

"Send him to me," said Skelton briefly.

In due time Lewis stood before Skelton in the library, through whose diamond-paned windows the woods and fields glowed beautifully under the red December sun. Skelton began in his calm, reasonable voice:

"Lewis, Mr. Bulstrode tells me that you spend most of your time with Yellow Jack and the stablemen, instead of at your books. How is this?"

"Because, sir," answered Lewis, "I am very fond of horses, and I'm not doing any harm down at the stables."

Skelton turned and faced the boy, whose tone was perfectly respectful, but it was that of one disposed to argue the point. As Lewis's eyes met his, Skelton was struck by their beauty—they were so deeply, so beautifully black, and the very same idea came into Lewis's mind—"What black, black eyes Mr. Skelton has!"

Skelton's memory went back twenty-five years. How wonderfully like was the little scamp's coolness to his own in the bygone days, when old Tom Shapleigh would come over to rail and bluster at him!

"At present," continued Skelton, smiling a little, "horses and horse-racing cannot take up a great deal of your time. It is your business to fit yourself for your manhood. You have every advantage for acquiring the education of a gentleman. Bulstrode, with all his faults, is the best-educated man I ever met; and, besides, it is my wish, my command, that you shall be studious."

"But, Mr. Skelton," said Lewis, with strange composure, and as if asking a simple question, "while I know you are very generous to me, why do you command me? Mr. Bulstrode is my guardian."

The boy's audacity and the shock of finding that his mind had begun to dwell on his status at Deerchase, completely staggered Skelton. Moreover, Lewis's composure was so inflexible, his eyes so indomitable, that he all at once seemed to reach the mental stature of a man. Skelton was entirely at a loss how to answer him, and for a moment the two pairs of black eyes, so wonderfully alike, met in an earnest gaze.

"I cannot explain that to you now," answered Skelton after a little pause; "but I think you will see for yourself that at Deerchase I must be obeyed. Now, in regard to your continual presence at the stables, it must stop. I do not forbid you to go, altogether, but you must go much less than you have been doing, and you must pay more attention to your studies. You may go."

Lewis went out and Skelton returned to his books. But he was strangely shaken. That night he said to Bulstrode, after Lewis had gone to bed:

"What promise there is in the boy! I don't mean promise of genius—God forbid! he will write no Voices of the People at nineteen—but of great firmness of character and clearness of intellect."

"I don't see why you are so down on genius," said Bulstrode, not without latent malice. "You were always reckoned a genius yourself."

"That is why I would not have Lewis reckoned one mistakenly, as I have been. There is something not altogether human about genius; it is always a miracle. It places a man apart from his fellows. He is an immortal among mortals. He is a man among centaurs. Give a man all the talent he can carry, but spare him genius if you would have him happy. There must be geniuses in the world, but let not Lewis Pryor be one of them, nor let him—let him be falsely reckoned one!"

CHAPTER X.

The races had always been a great event in the county, but Skelton's presence and personal interest in them, and his large outlay upon his stable, gave an increased zest to the sport. On Sundays the gentlemen of the county scarcely went in church until sermon-time at all now, but sat around on the tombstones and talked horse unflaggingly. When it rained they gathered in the low porch of the church, and the murmur of their voices penetrated the great doors and accompanied Mr. Conyers's voice during the liturgy. Mr. Conyers had conscientious scruples about racing, as he had about everything else, and, seeing how much his congregation was given over to it, and hearing of the large sums of money that would change hands at the spring meeting, he took it upon himself to preach a sermon against the cult of the horse. Skelton, for a wonder, happened to be at church that Sunday with Lewis. As the clergyman preached earnestly and plainly, inveighing against the state of affairs, people had very little trouble in fitting his remarks to certain individuals. He spoke of the wrong of men of great wealth and personal influence throwing both in the scales of demoralising sports; and every eye was turned on Skelton, who bore it unflinchingly and even smilingly. His dark, well-cut face, with its high nose and firm chin, was clearly outlined against the ridiculous purple-silk curtains of his pew. But he did not move an eyelash under the scrutiny of the whole congregation. When Conyers branched off, denouncing the greater folly and wickedness of men who could ill afford it risking their all upon a matter so full of uncertainties, chances, and cheats as racing, that brought Blair upright in his pew. He folded his arms and glared angrily at the preacher. No cool composure was there, but red-hot wrath, scarcely restrained. Then it was old Tom Shapleigh's turn. Tom was a vestryman, and that was the handle that Conyers had against him when he spoke of the evil example of older men who should be the pillars of decorum, and who were connected with the church, giving themselves over to these pernicious amusements. Old Tom was the most enthusiastic turfite going, and, having become one of the managers of the Campdown course, had not been to a single meeting of the vestry since that event. But he could not have been kept away from the managers' meeting except by tying him. Mr. Shapleigh was in a rage within half a minute, bustling about in his pew, and slapping his prayer-book together angrily. But nothing could exceed Mrs. Shapleigh's air of profound satisfaction. "I told you so!" was written all over her face. Sylvia, like Skelton, managed to maintain her composure. When the congregation was dismissed and the clergyman came out among the gossiping people in the churchyard, he was avoided more resolutely than ever, except by a few persons. Skelton walked up promptly, and said:

"Good morning, Conyers. You scalped me this morning, but I know it comes from your being so unnecessarily honest. As I've doubled my subscription to the club, I think it's only fair to double it to the church, so you may call on me."

"Thank you," said Conyers with real feeling, more touched by Skelton's magnanimity than by his money; "I see you appreciate that what I said was from a motive of conscience."

"Of course. It won't damp my enthusiasm for the races, but it certainly shall not turn me from a man as upright as yourself. Good morning."

Next came old Tom Shapleigh, fuming:

"Well, hello, Conyers. You made a devil of a mess of it this morning."

"Mr. Shapleigh, you shouldn't speak of the devil before Mr. Conyers," remonstrated Mrs. Shapleigh.

"I m sure he speaks of the devil often enough before me, and of hell, too, Mrs. Shapleigh!" roared Mr. Shapleigh. "Now, Conyers, I tell you what: if I can't be a vestryman and on the board of managers too, why, begad! I'll resign from the vestry. —See if I don't, Mrs. Shapleigh!"

"And the bishop coming too!" groaned Mrs. Shapleigh—for the long-expected visitation had not yet been made, but was expected shortly.

"And if a man will go to the dogs," shouted old Tom, growing more angry every moment, "why, horse racing is a deuced gentlemanly road to ruin."

"You are at liberty to think as you please, Mr. Shapleigh," said poor Conyers, his sallow face flushing. "I have done my duty, and I fear no man."

Sylvia Shapleigh at that moment put her hand in his and gave him one of the kindest looks in the world out of her soft, expressive, grey eyes.

"You always do your duty, and you never fear any man," she said, and Conyers felt as if he had heard a consoling angel.

The Blairs came along on the heels of the Shapleighs. Mrs. Blair, although usually she bitterly resented any reflection cast on Blair, was yet secretly pleased at the clergyman's wigging, in the vain hope that it might do some good; so she, too, spoke to Conyers cordially and kindly. Blair passed him with a curt nod. The Blairs proceeded to their rickety carriage—which, however, was drawn by a pair of first-class nags, for Blair could always afford a good horse—and went home. For all their billing and cooing they occasionally differed, and on this occasion they did not bill and coo at all.

Mr. and Mrs. Shapleigh not only did not bill and coo on their way home, but had a very spirited matrimonial skirmish.

"Mr. Shapleigh," said Mrs. Shapleigh, as soon as she was settled in the coach, "I know what I shall do, after your threat to resign from the vestry. I shall have Mr. Conyers pray for you in church!"

Now, this was the one threat which never failed to infuriate old Tom, because he knew Mrs. Shapleigh was fully capable of asking it, and Conyers was fully capable of doing it. So his reply was a shout of wrath:

"The hell you will! Very well, madam, very well. The day that Conyers has the effrontery to pray for me, that day my subscription to his salary stops. I'll not be prayed for, madam—I'll be damned if I will! And I am a very good Churchman, but if I am prayed for in Abingdon church, I'll turn Baptist, and be baptized in Hunting Creek just as soon as we have a freeze, so I can risk my life and say my wife drove me to it. And I'll die impenitent—see if I don't, Mrs. Shapleigh. No, I'll do worse: I'll join the Methodists and pray for *you*, madam, in prayer meeting—damn me, that's what I'll do!"

This last terrible threat prevailed; for once, Mrs. Shapleigh was beaten, and she knew it.

Blair had continued to feel an almost wild solicitude about Alabaster, and to regard him more and more as a horse of destiny. Nothing could shake this belief, not even when Alabaster suddenly developed in training the most diabolical temper that could be imagined. This, Blair professed to believe, was another guarantee of Alabaster's speed and endurance; he declared he had never known one of those devilish horses that was not invincible on the race track. But here a serious difficulty occurred. The horse, being so watched and tended by Blair and Hilary, took the most vicious dislike towards the negro stablemen generally, and especially the boy that was to ride him—for most of the jockeys in that part of the world were negro boys. Hilary was the only person that could ride him, and even then he would sometimes kick and bite and plunge furiously; but there was no getting Hilary off a horse's back, as Alabaster found out. In those days in Virginia the boys rode almost before they walked, and amused their adolescence by riding unbroken colts bare-backed.

They rode like Comanche Indians or Don Cossacks. Occasionally an accident happened, but it was regarded in the light of falling downstairs, or slipping upon the ice, or any other unlooked-for dispensation.

Although Skelton and Blair hated each other and made no disguise about it, yet it was not the fashion for gentlemen to quarrel, and so they kept on terms scrupulously. Blair had called upon Skelton a second time, and Skelton was waiting until after the spring race meeting was over and Jaybird had distanced Alabaster before returning the visit. On the occasional Sundays when they met at church, both men talked together civilly enough in a group. Skelton had heard of Alabaster's sudden demoralisation, and Blair knew it; but Blair had a trump left to play before the final game. One Sunday, soon after this, Mrs. Blair having wheedled Blair into going to church, and Skelton happening along, a number of gentlemen were standing about the churchyard, and some talk about the coming match between Jaybird and Alabaster was indulged in. The deepest interest was felt in this match, and nearly every man in the county had something on it. Blair had so much on it, that sometimes the thought of it drove the ruddy colour out of his face when he was alone and in a reflective mood. And then came in that sudden change in the horse's temper, and Blair made up his mind that Hilary should ride the horse. The boy was, of course, much more intelligent than the negro jockey, and was, in fact, one of the best riders in a county where everybody rode well. Mrs. Blair made no objection—she saw too plainly the necessity for not throwing away a single chance—but she was unhappy at the idea that her fresh-faced stripling should be drawn into the vortex.

Blair mentioned this, talking with Skelton and half a dozen men listening.

"Alabaster has got a devil of a temper," he said frankly, "but my boy Hilary can manage him—that is, as far as anybody can. I think Hilary could keep him in a straight course. Of course, I don't say he can hold the horse—the chap's not yet fifteen—but nobody can, for that matter. Alabaster has a mouth of iron, and he knows what other horses don't know—that nobody can really hold a horse who hasn't got a mind to be held. But with Hilary it is simply a question of sticking on him and heading him right, and the youngster can do that."

"Do you apprehend any danger?" asked Skelton.

Blair laughed pleasantly, showing his white teeth.

"Well, I'd apprehend some danger for myself. I weigh a hundred and two-and-sixty, and if the creature landed me unexpectedly in the road it would be a pretty heavy fall; but as for the boy, why, Alabaster could no more get rid of him than he could throw a grasshopper. I would be perfectly willing to back Alabaster with Hilary up against Jaybird with your young friend Lewis Pryor—that is, if *you* do not apprehend any danger."

"Done!" said Skelton calmly. He had been caught in a trap, and he knew it; but as Blair had never hesitated to accept a challenge from him, so he would not under any circumstances refuse a challenge from Blair. Of course, he at once saw the drift of Blair's remark—it was malicious, to bring Lewis forward, and, besides, it was extremely unlikely that he should be so good a rider as Hilary Blair. Nevertheless Skelton said:

"Lewis Pryor has not ridden barebacked ever since he was born, like your boy, but he has been well taught in the riding schools, and he is naturally as fine a rider as I ever saw. Jaybird isn't vicious; it is more intelligence than anything else in riding him. I think I can trust Lewis farther than the negro boys that do duty here for jockeys. They can ride very much as you say your boy can, but as for any intelligent management of a race, why they are simply incapable of it."

Blair did not like the comparison between Hilary and the negro jockeys, but he, too, said:

"Done!" And Skelton added:

"Come to my house to-morrow, and we'll arrange it."

"No," answered Blair stoutly. "Come to my house."

"Certainly, if you wish," replied Skelton courteously.

As Blair drove home with his wife through the odorous woods, already awaking to the touch of spring although it was only February, exultation possessed him. As for Jaybird, he had long been of the opinion that he was a leggy, overbred beast, all looks and no bottom; and then to be ridden by that black-eyed Pryor boy, that had learned to ride in a riding-school—why it would simply be beer and skittles for Hilary and Alabaster. Even if Jaybird could win the race, Lewis Pryor couldn't. Mrs. Blair did not wholly share these glorious expectations, and hated the idea of Hilary having anything to do with it.

Skelton's silent anger grew more and more, as he thought over the pit into which Blair had dropped him. He cared nothing for the money involved, but he cared tremendously for the issue between Blair and himself. And then, to put Lewis up against Hilary! Skelton would cheerfully at any moment have given half his fortune rather than Hilary should have any triumph over Lewis. Then, like Mrs. Blair, he did not think a precocious acquaintance with the race course a good thing for a boy, and so he counted this stroke of Blair's as another grudge owed to him and assuredly to be paid off.

Bulstrode became every day more disgusted. Work on the great book had come to a standstill. Skelton still got piles of books every month from Europe, and stacks of letters from literary and scientific men, but his heart and soul apparently were in the Campdown course. The whole neighbourhood was arrayed in hostile camps on the question. Some of the women, like Mrs. Shapleigh, openly, and Elizabeth Blair, secretly, opposed it; but among the men, only Mr. Conyers and Bulstrode were not enthusiastically in favour of it. Skelton persistently described Blair's horses as "the Newington stable," although Blair himself continued to allude to them deprecatingly as his "horse or two." And Skelton was always making inquiries into the pedigree of

Blair's horses, which rather staggered Blair, who knew that they were not above reproach, and that an occasional strain of good blood did not entitle him to call them thoroughbreds. Nevertheless, this could not cure him of his delusion that his "horse or two" would one day beat Skelton's very best blood and brawn.

CHAPTER XI.

In the course of time the bishop arrived upon his yearly visitation. He was a large, handsome man, with an apostolic manner. He never condemned; he only remonstrated, and was in himself a harmless and well-meaning person. But he found a most unsatisfactory state of affairs in Abingdon parish. The breach between the pastor and the flock was so wide that, had they not been the slowest and least aggressive people in the world, they would have long since parted company.

The bishop spent one night at the rectory, and thereafter accepted very thankfully the lavish hospitality of the laity. The rain leaked into the bishop's room at the rectory, and its steady drip, drip, drip kept him awake. The bed upon which his episcopal form reposed was very hard, and next morning, when he peered out of his curtainless window, he saw Mr. Conyers chopping up wood for the black cook. That was enough for the bishop. The next day he went to Belfield, preferring Mrs. Shapleigh's company to the discomforts of Conyers's meagre home.

Of course, bishop and pastor had talked about the Campdown race course, and Mr. Conyers had been gently chided for excessive zeal. Mr. Conyers thereupon said his conscience would not let him remain silent when he saw the evil the matter was doing. He knew at least a dozen members of his congregation who had become bankrupt through frequenting the course, and he knew another one—he meant Blair, but did not speak the name—who was on the highway to ruin. He had been grieved to see Mr. Skelton's immense fortune and great personal influence thrown in the scale in favour of racing, and it was from the sincerest sense of duty that he had preached in season and out of season against what had become a public shame and scandal.

The bishop, in a sonorous voice but with weak reason, argued that horse racing, although to be deplored, was not necessarily wrong. Mr. Conyers respectfully submitted that it had proved very wrong in his personal experience, and that he was striving to prevail against what was obviously and palpably an evil to the community, and he could not think it reasonable to suppose that the obvious evil to the men of the county was balanced by the possible good to the horse. The bishop "hemmed" and "ha'd" and beat about the bush. Then Conyers was induced, by some foolish impulse, to impart to the bishop the doubts he had laboured under. The bishop, who accepted all he was taught without investigation, strongly recommended Mr. Conyers to do the same. Mr. Conyers's mind was unfortunately so constituted that he couldn't do it. On the whole, the bishop never had a more uncomfortable visit in his life, and was sincerely glad when Mrs. Shapleigh's carriage hove in sight.

Mrs. Shapleigh was not insensible to the honour of entertaining a bishop, and even confided to Mr. Shapleigh a wish that the bishop, who was a widower of two years' standing, might take a fancy to Sylvia, who was only thirty years his junior.

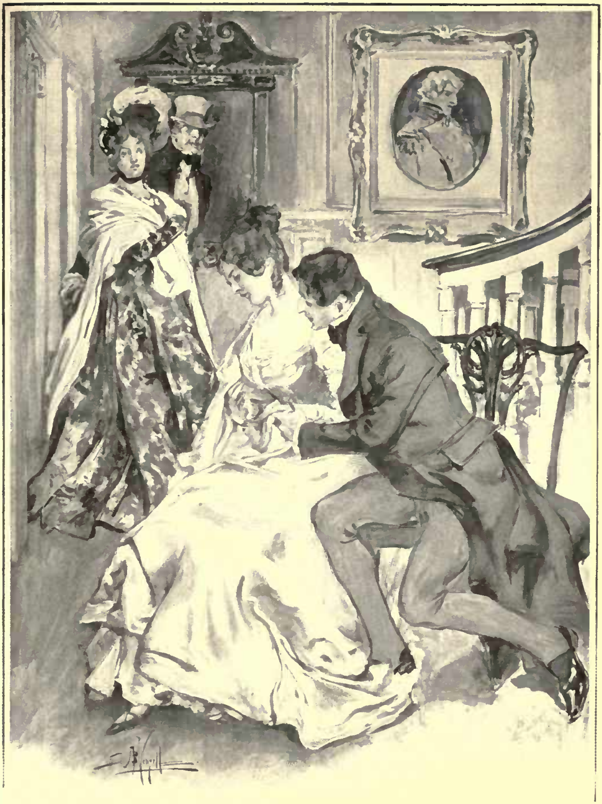
The bishop preached the following Sunday at church, and Bulstrode went to hear him, and took so much snuff during the sermon that the bishop sneezed seventeen times without any intermission. The bishop, however, had heard of Bulstrode's great learning, and of Skelton and all the glories of Deerchase, and he gently insinuated to Mrs. Shapleigh that he would like to meet them. So Mrs. Shapleigh at once sent a darky tearing across the bridge with an invitation for the next day. The bishop spent his time at Belfield, when he was neither eating nor sleeping, sitting in a capacious chair in the drawing-room, and listening very gravely to Mrs. Shapleigh's prattle.

Sylvia spent most of her time out in the boat with Lewis, in order to get rid of the bishop, who bored her to death. Lewis told this to Bulstrode, who repeated it to Skelton. Skelton laughed quietly. That spirited young woman was not likely to fancy a person after the bishop's pattern. Nevertheless, both of these prodigies—Skelton and Bulstrode—as Mrs. Shapleigh considered them, accepted her invitation to dinner, and so did Conyers, whose pleasure in going to Belfield was that Sylvia comforted and understood him.

Bulstrode was disgusted because Conyers came to dine at Belfield that day. He had meant to wallop the bishop, figuratively speaking, but respect for Conyers would restrain him.

Skelton was indifferent. He went because he hoped to be amused, and because the glory of the bishop's visit would be dimmed if the distinguished Mr. Skelton, of Deerchase, failed to pay his respects; and then, he found Sylvia the most interesting woman of his acquaintance, and he wanted to see how she and the bishop got on. He was very much diverted upon this last point. The bishop was quite willing to overlook the thirty years' difference in their ages, but Miss Sylvia perversely and subtly brought it forward at every turn.

Old Tom, too, seemed bitten by a devil of contradiction, and the more Mrs. Shapleigh tried to give the conversation at the dinner table an evangelical turn, the more persistently old Tom talked about the races, past and future, the coming spring meeting, the beauties and delights of racing, and his determination, if he couldn't be a vestryman and a manager too, to resign from the vestry. Sylvia cast a roguish glance at Skelton every now and then from under her eyelashes, and Skelton's eyes laughed back at her sympathetically. The bishop shook his head deprecatingly at Mr. Shapleigh, but said nothing in condemnation. Out of compliment to Skelton and Bulstrode he tried very hard to introduce some knotty metaphysical talk, but luck was against him. Skelton declined to enter the lists with such an antagonist, and Bulstrode professed the most hypocritical ignorance upon every possible point of view presented by the bishop. "Don't know, I'm sure"—"Never heard of it before"—"Good Gad, ask Skelton there; he reads, I don't"—until the bishop became so insistent that Bulstrode suddenly turned and rent him. This very



SYLVIA DID MUCH FOR HERSELF . . . . BY THAT SPEECH.
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much amused Sylvia, sitting quiet and demure, playing at eating her dinner. Then Skelton launched into talk of horses and dogs, all very refined, very spirited, but to Conyers, watching him with sad eyes, very painful. How could such a man waste time on such subjects? Between horse racing and philosophy, poor Conyers had a dull time of it.

The bishop, however, although he was lamentably deficient in the philosophy learned out of books, was nevertheless an excellent philosopher in action, and ate a very good dinner in much comfort, without disturbing himself about either the principles or the practices of his neighbours. After dinner Skelton went up to Sylvia in a corner of the drawing-room, and said in a low voice:

"How have you stood him?"

"Dreadfully ill, I am afraid," answered Sylvia, hopelessly. "If it hadn't been for little Lewis and his boat, I should have gone mad in these last few days."

Skelton's eyes kindled. "How fond that boy is of you!"

"How can one help being fond of him? He is so manly, so intelligent, so affectionate!" Without knowing it Sylvia did much for herself in Skelton's regard by that speech.

Mrs. Shapleigh insisted that Sylvia should play on the guitar for the bishop. Sylvia began to tune it, but two strings snapped in succession. Skelton then offered to string it for her, but then the new strings snapped. Sylvia shot him a grateful glance, as the guitar was laid away. Mrs. Shapleigh expressed to the bishop, and everybody else, her regret that the bishop couldn't have heard Sylvia sing. When she said so to Bulstrode, he remarked in an audible growl:

"Drat the bishop!"

The reverend gentleman was luckily deaf to this, and Skelton immediately rose to go, with a wicked smile at Sylvia, who, in her way, seemed to lack for appreciation of her mother's ecclesiastical idol quite as much as Bulstrode. When Skelton was back at Deerchase that night he thought Sylvia one of the most winning girls he had ever met. But then, he could not admire a charming girl as other men could. He was bound hand and foot. This idea threw him in one of his silent rages, and he walked the library floor for a long time, railing inwardly at Fate.

CHAPTER XII.

SKELTON was naturally far from pleased at having to stultify himself with Lewis by allowing him the full liberty of the stables, when he had strictly forbidden it. But there was no help for it after having fallen into what he considered the clumsy trap set for him by Blair. He was at great trouble to explain the whole thing to Lewis, when he sent for the boy in the library, to talk it over, and Lewis, whose wit was nimble enough, understood in a moment. Boylike, he was delighted. He saw himself, the cynosure of all eyes, coming in a winner by an impossible number of lengths, with the men hurrahing, the ladies waving their handkerchiefs, and Sylvia Shapleigh handing him a bouquet before all the crowd of people. He hoped Mrs. Blair would not be there, though, to see Hilary's downfall. Skelton explained everything to him carefully, took him to the stables, and himself watched him every day when he exercised Jaybird around the half-mile track on the Deerchase land, back of the stables.

Another reason why Skelton was not pleased at the notion of having Lewis in the race was that he was afraid the boy would acquire a fondness for the sport, and he talked to him very seriously upon the subject, and told him that this first experience would no doubt be his last of the kind. As it had been during the time Skelton was teaching him to manage the boat, the two were thrown together much, and Lewis took the same strange pleasure in Skelton's company as before.

Bulstrode was not at all pleased with the arrangement, and became suddenly very strict and exacted a great deal of work from Lewis with his books. Lewis did the work, putting his mind to it very steadily, for fear Bulstrode would complain to Skelton, and then Skelton might not let him ride in the race, after all. Bulstrode was opposed to the whole thing. If Lewis lost the race he should be sorry, because he loved the boy; and if Hilary Blair lost it — good heavens! What would become of that dear Mrs. Blair, with her soft eyes and her sweet, ridiculous Latin?

Bulstrode was talking about this one day, in his own den, to Lewis. This was the only shabby spot at Deerchase. It was smoky and snuffy to the last degree, and full of that comfortable untidiness which marks a man of books. However, here were only a few battered volumes, that contrasted strangely with Skelton's magnificent array down in the library, which lined one vast room and overflowed into another. This contrast always tickled Bulstrode immensely, who had a way of calling attention to it, and then tapping his head, saying, "Here's my library." And there it was indeed.

Lewis was balancing himself on the wide window seat, which was about twenty feet from the ground, and, after the manner of boys, trying to see how far he could lean out without tumbling over and breaking his neck.

Nevertheless, he was listening very closely to Bulstrode, whose attention was divided. He was, all at once, pursuing the thread of his own thoughts, saving Lewis from tumbling out, and blowing smoke through the open window. It was one of the peculiarly bright, cloudless March days that come in that latitude.

Everything on the plantation was full of the activity of spring. The great wheat fields in the distance showed a faint green upon the surface, although only the tenderest points of the wheat had pushed through the rich black earth. The woods were enveloped in a soft, green-grey haze, and the delicious smell of the newly ploughed ground was in the air. Afar off they could hear faintly the voices of the multitudes of black labourers, singing and laughing and chattering, as they drove the ploughs merrily. The thrushes and the blackbirds rioted musically in the trees, and a profligate robin roystered in a branch of the tall silver beech that grew directly under the window. The lawn was freshly and perfectly green, and the gravel walks were being lazily rolled by Sam Trotter, who was Bob Skinny's coadjutor. The river was always beautiful, and the sun had turned it to molten gold. The great, dull, red-brick house, with its quaint peaks and gables, and the beautifully designed wings which had been added by Skelton, showed charmingly against the background of noble trees and the hedge of giant cedars which marked the pleasure grounds. A peacock sunned himself proudly on the stone steps which led down from the plateau on which the house stood, while on the marble porch, directly facing the peacock, stood Bob Skinny, superb in his blue coat and brass buttons and enormous shirt-ruffle, eying the peacock while the peacock eyed him. Neither one of them had anything better to do, although Bob occasionally called out a command to Sam Trotter about the way he was doing his work, which Sam received in contemptuous silence.

Bulstrode was rather insusceptible to the charm of Nature and still life, but even he was deeply impressed with the beauty and plenty of the scene around him. Lewis felt it in the joyous, exhilarating way that young creatures feel pleasure before they have learned to think. He felt that it was good to live.

Bulstrode was in his usual communicative mood.

After denouncing horse racing as a foolish and inconsequent sport in general, he began to give his views about the Campdown races in particular.

"Human nature is a queer thing," said he to Lewis—he called it "natur'." "Here are these races the whole county is mad about. You think it's a comedy, hey, boy? Well, it's not. It's a tragedy—a tragedy, d'ye understand?"

"There seems to be a fight over it all around," said Lewis, who was alive to everything. "The parson's against it. He's a good man—ain't he, Mr. Bulstrode?"

"Yes, by Heaven he is!" cried Bulstrode, taking a huge pinch of snuff. "And let me tell you, I fear that man, just as I fear and reverence a good woman, not on account of his brains, although they are fairly good, but because of his superlative honesty. As for that lunkhead of a bishop, I protest he is wearisome to me. Mrs. Blair—Heaven bless her!—beguiled me into going to hear the creetur' preach"—Bulstrode never could get such words as "creature" and "nature" and "figure" right—"and, upon my soul, I never heard such a farrago since God made me. He attempts to reason, the creetur' does, and talks about ecclesiastical history, and he's got a smattering of what he calls theology and canon law. Lord help the fools in this world! For every fool that dies two are born."

Lewis was accustomed to hearing bishops spoken of disrespectfully, and therefore took no exception to it.

"Mr. Shapleigh says," he continued, after another effort to see how far he could get out of the window without falling and breaking his neck, "Mr. Shapleigh says the bishop thinks Mr. Conyers has gone too far in opposing the races."

Here Lewis nearly succeeded in tumbling out, and Bulstrode caught him by the leg in the nick of time.

"God bless the boy! can't you keep quiet half a minute? Of course he has, to please that old fool, with his defective quantities and his notion that he is the wisest man that ever lived. However, when I went to hear that precious sermon I sat right under the creetur', flapping about the pulpit in his white nightgown, and I took snuff until I nearly made him sneeze his head off. The day I was asked to dinner with him by that damned Mrs. Shapleigh, the ass sought me out—he'd heard something of Mr. Bulstrode! Ha! ha! He began talking what he thought was philosophy, and he doesn't know a syllogism from a churn-dasher, so I couldn't but trip him up. I thought it wasn't worth while to try him with anything that wasn't rudimentary, so I said to him, 'Do you believe in the Aristotelian system?' It seems he'd heard of old Aristotle somewhere or other, so he says, smirking and mighty polite: 'Of course, I admit the soundness of it, Mr. Bulstrode.' 'And,' said I very crossly, 'I suppose you believe in a revealed religion, don't you?' 'O—w!' says the bishop, exactly as if I had stuck a pin in him. 'My cloth, sir, is answer enough to that.' Then I remarked: 'You've got to accept Thomas Aquinas too —for if ever a bridge was made between natural and revealed religion, old Thomas has made it.' You ought to have seen his countenance then. It shut him up for at least five minutes, during which he never opened his mouth except to put something in it. Then he began to tell me some rigmarole about Anglican theology, and I banged my fist down on the table, and said, '*Who consecrated Parker?* Answer me that.' Bulstrode shouted rather than said this, his recollection of the bishop's discomfiture was so keen. "I know Mrs. Shapleigh said I behaved like an old ruffian to the bishop, but, dang me, the bishop's an ass!"

"I believe you think everybody's an ass except the good folks," said Lewis.

"I believe I do," answered Bulstrode, taking another gigantic pinch of snuff. "But I told you there was a tragedy about those Campdown races, and so there is. Now, this is it. Skelton has made up his mind to ruin Blair. He needn't trouble himself—Blair will do the work fast enough without anybody's help. But our respected friend and benefactor means to have a hand in it. That's the meaning of the money he is pouring out like water, and that's why Blair is making such a fight. But that poor wife of his—Lewis, Lewis, if you win that match you'll stab that gentle creature to the heart!"

Lewis gazed at Bulstrode with wide-open eyes. He was naturally tender and reverent to women, and the idea of inflicting pain upon any one of them was hateful to him. All at once the pleasure in the race seemed to vanish. What pleasure could it be when he came galloping in ahead, if poor Mrs. Blair were ruined and wretched and broken-hearted? He stopped his acrobatic performances and sat quite still in the window, looking sadly into Bulstrode's face.

"Will it make Mrs. Blair *very* unhappy if Jaybird wins?" he asked.

"Unhappy! It will drive Blair to the wall absolutely. He has acted like a madman all through. He has borrowed every penny he could lay his hands on to put on that black horse of his. Blair is a study to me. He is the most practical man in making money and the most unpractical man in getting rid of it I ever saw. Why, he makes more actual profit out of that place, Newington, than Skelton does out of Deerchase. Old Tom Shapleigh says he is the best farmer, stock-raiser, manager of negroes in the State of Virginia. If he could be driven from the turf he would be a rich man in ten years. But he's got that racing vampire fixed upon him. God help his wife and children!"

This made Lewis very unhappy. He went about haunted with the feeling that he was Mrs. Blair's enemy. He began to hate the idea of the race as much as he had once been captivated by it. This was not lost on Skelton.

Before that, the two boys had showed much elation over their coming prominence at the race meeting. When they met they assumed great knowingness in discussing turf matters, which they only half understood, and put on mannish airs to each other. Instead of "Lewis" and "Hilary," as it had once been, it became "Pryor" and "Blair." But afterward Hilary was surprised to find a great want of enthusiasm in Lewis. He spoke of it to his father, and Blair at once fancied that Lewis had shown the white feather. He told it triumphantly to Elizabeth, and adduced it as another proof that he had a "sure thing." Elizabeth, though, was not so confident. She had seen too many disappointments come of Blair's "sure things."

Skelton had not intended to return Blair's last visit until after the race meeting, but the conviction that Blair would lose the race induced him to go over one day in the early spring to pay a visit, thinking it would be very painful to seek Blair out in defeat. So he drove over in his stylish curricle. Hilary met him at the door of the Newington house, and Skelton mentally compared him to Lewis Pryor, much to Lewis's advantage. Skelton, though, scarcely did Hilary justice. The boy had his father's physique and Blair's wide mouth and white teeth, and also a great many freckles; but he had his mother's charming expression. He escorted Skelton within the house.

Blair at once appeared, and with much apparent cordiality led the way into the old-fashioned drawing-room, where Elizabeth sat sewing, with little Mary at her knee. An Arab hospitality prevailed among these people, and enemies were welcomed at each other's houses.

They talked together very amicably without once mentioning the subject which was uppermost in all their minds, until suddenly Hilary, with that maladroit ingenuity of which boys seem peculiarly possessed, asked suddenly:

"Mr. Skelton, how's Lewis Pryor coming on with Jaybird?"

"Admirably," responded Skelton with the utmost coolness.

Blair had turned red, while Elizabeth had grown pale. Only little Mary sat and sewed unconcernedly.

"I think," said Elizabeth, after an awkward pause, and expressing the first idea that came into her mind, "it is the last race I will ever consent to let Hilary ride. I don't think it does boys any good to interest them in such things."

Here was an opportunity for Skelton to hit back for Blair's sneer at Lewis Pryor when the match was first arranged.

"If you have the slightest objection to it," he said blandly, "speak only one word and it is off. I need not say to you that I should regard the forfeit as nothing, and even give up the pleasure of seeing my horse matched against Mr. Blair's, rather than give you one moment's pain."

"Ah, no," cried Elizabeth—she had taken fire at Skelton's tone, and hastened to redeem herself from the humiliation of trying to get out of it.

Blair simply glared at her. He thought Elizabeth had lost her senses; and before she could utter another word, he said, with a kind of savage coolness: "Certainly not. But if you think that your—young ward, is he —?"

"Lewis Pryor is not my ward, he is Mr. Bulstrode's," responded Skelton, without the slightest change of tone. But there was a flush rising in his dark face. Blair managed to convey, subtly, a contempt of the boy, which was to Skelton the most infuriating thing under heaven.

"Very well, then, whatever he is; if you feel any doubts of his ability to manage a horse—"

"I don't feel the slightest doubt," answered Skelton, the flush mounting higher and showing dully through his olive skin. "It is a pity that this young gentleman should have started the one subject that we cannot discuss. It is difficult to teach a boy tact—impossible, almost, for when they are tactful it is born with them."

This, delivered in Skelton's graceful manner, left the impression upon the mind of Blair and his wife that Skelton had very artfully called their boy a lout. However, he then turned his attention to little Mary, the childish image of her mother. Mary answered his questions correctly and demurely, and presently startled them by asking when Mr. Lewis Pryor was coming over to give her a ride on his pony.

The child had met him riding about the roads and at church, and they had struck up an acquaintance, with the result of this promise. But as Lewis had never been to Newington, and, in fact, had never been asked, this increased the prevailing discomfort. Skelton, though, with elaborate ease, promised to find out from Lewis and let her know. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Blair took any part in the discussion, and they altogether ignored Lewis's existence. All the ingenuity in the world could not have devised anything more galling to Skelton.

Then, Blair seemed not to be able to keep off the question of the races again, although no mention was made of the especial match between them. Elizabeth listened with an aching heart. What a trifle it was to Skelton, while to them it was the most tremendous event in the world. It might mean the turning of herself and Blair and her children out of house and home. But she gave no sign of this inward fear, speaking lightly, although she had a horrible feeling that Skelton knew how hollow their pretence was—that the money Blair had risked might have to be got by some occult means, for not another penny could be raised upon Newington. Presently Skelton rose and said good-by, Blair seeing him to the door and watching him as he stepped lightly into his curricle. Then Blair came back like a criminal to his wife.

But Elizabeth had no reproaches to make. She was fluent enough when her feelings were not deeply touched, but under the influence of profound emotion she became perfectly silent. She was inapt at reproaches too; but Blair would cheerfully have preferred even the extraordinary wiggings that Mrs. Shapleigh gave her husband to the still and heartbreaking reproof of Elizabeth's despairing, wordless look. He walked about the room for a few moments, while Elizabeth, with her work dropping from her listless hand, sat in fixed sadness.

"By Jupiter, the horse *must* win!" he cried excitedly, after a moment. "For God's sake, Elizabeth, don't look at me in that way!"

Elizabeth made a desperate effort to rally.

"How can I accuse you," she said, "when I, too, am a coward before Richard Skelton? I ought to say: 'We are desperately poor and in debt—we can't afford to risk anything, no matter how promising the chances are, because we have nothing to risk. We are living now upon our creditors.' Instead of that, I sit by and smile and say I have no fear, and profess to be willing. I am the greatest coward in the world. One word, just now, and the whole thing would have been off—but I did not say it. No, I am as much to blame in this as you are."

Skelton, driving home, concluded he would stop at Belfield. He was inwardly raging, as he always was at any slight upon Lewis Pryor. There was he, Mr. Skelton, of Deerchase, supposed to be the richest and most powerful man in the county, and yet he could not get a single family to recognise that boy—except at Belfield. Just as he was turning this over bitterly in his mind, he drove up to the door of the Belfield house. It was yet in the bright forenoon.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Shapleigh were at home. Skelton only stayed a few minutes, when, glancing out of the window, he saw Sylvia and Lewis Pryor sitting together in the little summerhouse on the bridge across the creek that separated the two plantations. Skelton rose.

"I see Miss Shapleigh on the bridge, and if you will excuse me I will say good-day to you and join her."

Old Tom was excessively surprised.

"Why," said he, "you are paying us a monstrous short visit! I thought you had come especially to see me.'

"Not at all," said Skelton, "I called to pay my respects to the ladies," and, with a bow, he walked out, and they saw him cross the lawn and follow the bridge to the summerhouse.

"There, now, Mr. Shapleigh!" exclaimed Mrs. Shapleigh triumphantly, "wasn't I a long-headed woman, to have that summerhouse built eighteen years ago for Richard Skelton and Sylvia to make love in?"

"It's the first time they've ever been in it since it was built, ma'am."

"Well, everything has to have a beginning, Mr. Shapleigh, though, of course, I know he never can marry my poor, beautiful girl."

"Yes, he can, Mrs. Shapleigh. If he chooses to pay several hundred thousand dollars for her, he can."

"Mr. Shapleigh, you talk very foolishly. What man alive, do you think, would pay that much to marry any woman? Though I will say, if any woman is worth it, Sylvia is the one, and she's not half as good-looking as I was at her age, either."

"True, madam. But if one had half a million dollars to buy a wife with, he might have a good, long hunt before he found a woman like you, my own love."

"Now, Mr. Shapleigh, are you joking?"

"I can't hear you, my sweet," responded Mr. Shapleigh cheerfully. "Every day I seem to get deafer and deafer, particularly to your voice."

"I notice you can hear some things well enough. When I say, 'Mr. Shapleigh, we've got wild ducks for dinner to-day,' you can hear as well as I can. And when I say, 'Mr. Shapleigh, the moths have made ravages in the carpets,' you always think I'm talking about cabbages in the garden, or something a thousand miles off. You ought to be treated for your deafness and have it cured."

"Don't want to have it cured, ma'am."

Meanwhile, Skelton had joined Sylvia and Lewis in the summerhouse, which had been built expressly to harbour those two first named, but which, as Mr. Shapleigh truly said, had never held them together in their lives.

Lewis was rather pleased at Skelton's arrival. He fancied a kind of rivalry between Skelton and himself with Sylvia, and was immensely delighted at the notion of letting Skelton see how well he stood in Sylvia's good graces. Sylvia, too, was not insensible to the honour of Skelton's company, and sometimes wondered if—if—her surmises here became totally confused; but Skelton was undoubtedly the most charming man she had ever known, and a woman of Sylvia's intelligence was peculiarly sensitive to his charm. On Skelton's part, he felt profoundly grateful towards anybody who was kind to Lewis Pryor, and nothing could have brought Sylvia's attractions more seductively before him than her kindness to the boy.

Sylvia and Skelton grew so very friendly that Lewis, feeling himself slighted, stiffly said good-morning, and went back to Deerchase, when he got in his boat and sailed straight down the river, past Lone Point, and did not get back until the afternoon.

Left alone together, the man and the woman suddenly felt a sensation of intimacy. It was as if they had taken up again that thread which had been broken off so many years ago. Skelton pointed to the spot on the shore where she had said good-bye to him on that gusty September evening.

"There was where you kissed me," he said. At this Sylvia coloured deeply and beautifully and took refuge in levity, but the colour did not die out of her face, and Skelton noticed that her eyelids fluttered. She was such a very innocent creature, that, in spite of her cleverness, he could read her like a book.

Something impelled him to speak to her of Elizabeth Blair. "Good God!" he said, "that any human being should have the power to inflict the suffering on another that that woman inflicted on me nearly twenty years ago! And every time Conyers preaches about blessings in disguise I always think of that prime folly of my youth. Elizabeth Blair is good and lovely, but how wretched we should have been together. So I forgive her!" He did not say he forgave Blair.

Sylvia looked at him gravely and sympathetically. Skelton was smiling; he treated his past agonies with much contempt. But women never feel contempt for the sufferings of the heart, and listen with delight to that story of love, which is to them ever new and ever enchanting.

"How charming it must be to have had a great romance," said Sylvia, half laughing and yet wholly earnest—"one of those tremendous passions, you know, that teaches one all one can know! I am afraid I shall never have one, unless dear little Lewis comes to the rescue."

"You will know it one day, and that without Lewis," answered Skelton. "Some women are formed for grand passions, just as men come into the world with aptitude for great affairs."

"But how can I know it—here?" asked Sylvia impatiently. "See how circumscribed our lives are! I never knew it until lately, and then it came home to me, as it does every day, that the great, wide, beautiful, exciting world is not as far removed as another planet, which I used to fancy. But when I want to see the world, papa and mamma tell me they will take me to the Springs! That's not the world. It is only a little piece of this county picked up and put down in another county."

Skelton was sitting on the bench by her. He watched her lovely, dissatisfied eyes as they glanced impatiently and contemptuously on the still and beautiful scene. Yes, it would be something to teach this woman how much there was beyond the mere beauty and plenty and ease of a country life in a remote provincial place. Sylvia caught his eyes fixed on her so searchingly that she coloured again—the blood that morning was perpetually playing hide and seek in her cheeks.

Skelton went on in a strain rather calculated to foster than to soothe her impatience. He saw at once that he could produce almost any effect he wanted upon her, and that is a power with which men and women are seldom forbearing. Certainly Skelton was not. He loved power better than anything on earth, and the conquest of a woman worth conquering gave him infinite pleasure.

He felt this intoxication of power as he watched Sylvia. Although he was not a vain man, he could almost have fixed the instant when she, who had been long trembling on the brink of falling in love with him, suddenly lost her balance. They had sat in the summerhouse a long time, although it seemed short to them. Their voices unconsciously dropped to a low key, and there were eloquent stretches of silence between them. The noon was gone, and they heard the faint sound of the bugle calling the hands to work in the fields after the midday rest. Sylvia started, and rose as if to go. Skelton, without moving, looked at her with a strange expression of command in his eyes. He touched the tips of her fingers lightly, and that touch brought her back instantly to his side.

The secret contempt that a common-place man feels for a woman who falls in love with him comes from a secret conviction that he is not worthy of it, however blatant his vanity and self-love may be. But Skelton, the proudest but the least vain of men, was instinctively conscious that a woman who fell in love with him was really in love with certain great and commanding qualities he had. His self-love spoke the language of common sense to him. He did not give up the fight so quickly and conclusively as the younger and more impressionable Sylvia did. Knowing of a great stumbling block in his way, he had guarded himself against vague, sweet fancies. But Skelton was too wise a man not to know that when the master passion appeared and said "Lo, I am here!" he is not to be dismissed like a lackey, but, willingly or unwillingly, he must be entertained. The great passions are all unmannerly. They come at inconvenient seasons without asking leave, and the master of the house must give place to these mighty and commanding guests. Women meet them obsequiously at the door; men remain to be sought by these lordly visitors, but do not thereby escape.

As Skelton felt more and more the charm of Sylvia's sweetness, the ineffable flattery of her passion for him, a furious dissatisfaction began to work in him. If only he were placed like other men! But if he should love, the only way he could satisfy it would be by endowing the Blairs, whom he hated from his soul, with all his dead wife's vast fortune, or else proclaiming a certain thing about Lewis Pryor that would indeed make him rich, but make him also to be despised. Neither of these things could he bear to think of then. He was not yet so subjugated that pride and revenge could be displaced at once. But still he could not drag himself away from Sylvia. It was Sylvia, in the end, who broke away from him. She glanced at a little watch she wore, and a flood of colour poured into her face. She looked so guilty that Skelton smiled, but it was rather a melancholy smile. He thought that they were like two fair ships driven against each other to their destruction by vagabond winds and contrary tides.

CHAPTER XIII.

Every circumstance connected with the coming race meeting disgusted Bulstrode more and more. One night, sitting over the walnuts and the wine in the dining-room at Deerchase with Skelton and Lewis, Bulstrode gave vent to his dissatisfaction. He did not always dine with Skelton, and, indeed, when Bob Skinny's emissary came to his door to say that dinner was served, Bulstrode would generally answer: "Oh, hang dinner! I had a chop in the middle of the day, and I'll be shot if I'll sit for two hours with Skelton over a lot of French kickshaws, with him looking superciliously at me every time I touch the decanter." Bob Skinny would translate this message as follows: "Mr. Bulstrode, he present he compliments, sah, an' he say, ef you will have de circumlocution to excuse him, he done had he dinner."

Lewis, though, always dined with Skelton and enjoyed it. Skelton was at his best at dinner, and would sometimes exert himself to please the boy, whose tastes were singularly like his own. Lewis liked the exquisitely appointed table, the sight of the flowers upon it, the subtile air of luxury pervading the whole. He liked to lie back in his chair, making his one small glass of sherry last as long as he could, looking out upon the black clumps of the shrubbery that loomed large in the purple twilight, listening to the soft, melodious ripple of the broad river, and to Skelton's musical voice as he talked. It always vexed him when Miles Lightfoot was of the party, who was, however, under a good deal of restraint in Skelton's presence.

On this particular evening, though, Bulstrode was dining with Skelton and Lewis. The room was dim, for all the wax candles in the world could not light it brilliantly, and it was odorous with the scent of the blossoms of a dogwood tree that bloomed outside, and even thrust their bold, pretty faces almost through the window. But Bulstrode was undeniably cross, and uncomfortably attentive to the decanters.

"And how did Jaybird do to-day, Lewis?" asked Skelton; but before Lewis could answer, Bulstrode burst out:

"Jaybird go to perdition! Every time I think of him I remember that if the horse wins that race, Blair will be a ruined man. That is, he is more than half ruined already, but that will finish him."

"I shall be sorry, but I can't see how any body but Blair can be held responsible," answered Skelton calmly. "If a man who can't afford it *will* follow horse racing, and if he *will* put up a scrub against a thoroughbred, why, there's no stopping him; that man has an inbred folly that must bring him to ruin some time or other. I don't think this race, or any race especially, will effect the result. Blair has a passion for gambling on the turf, and that will ruin any man."

Lewis listened to this with a troubled face. Skelton's eyes saw it, and he felt angry with Bulstrode for putting such things into the boy's head. And besides, Lewis was only fifteen, and suppose his feelings should be worked upon to the extent that he should be guilty of the enormity of "pulling" the race? Skelton hastened to change the conversation.

The dinner was shorter than usual that night, and Lewis had to gulp down the last half of his glass of wine rather hurriedly. Skelton went off as usual to a corner of the square stone porch and smoked steadily. To his surprise, Bulstrode followed him and sat down on a bench. After a while Bulstrode began, argumentatively:

"I don't see why you want to drive Blair to the wall."

Skelton took his cigar from his lips, and was silent with astonishment. Bulstrode never presumed to force himself into Skelton's private affairs that way.

"And," continued Bulstrode, with his rich, beautiful voice full of tears, "he has that sweet and charming wife. Good God! Skelton, you must have a heart of stone!"

Skelton's impulse was to pick up a chair and brain Bulstrode on the spot, but instead, he only said coldly:

"You have been drinking, Bulstrode. You can't let a decanter pass you."

"Yes, I've been drinking," cried Bulstrode, with a frank laugh; "but you know yourself I'm a much better and braver man drunk than sober. When I'm sober I'm cowed by that devilish cool gentlemanliness of yours; but when I've had a bottle of port

I'm as good a man as you, Skelton; and I see that you will never be happy until you have made Blair the wretchedest man alive. Come, now. You've got lashings of money. Blair is as poor as a church mouse. You have got everything on earth."

Skelton had risen during this, and could scarcely keep his hands off Bulstrode where he sat; but it was grotesque enough that he could not make Bulstrode hold his tongue. He could only say between his teeth:

"Drunken dog!"

Bulstrode rose too at that, with a kind of dogged courage. "I am a drunken dog, I am!" he said; "but I am Wat Bulstrode, too; don't forget that. Don't forget that I know a great deal more out of books than you do. Don't forget that you could hardly get another man who could fill my place. Don't forget that I am more to you than all those thousands of volumes you've got in yonder. Don't forget that I am Lewis Pryor's guardian until he is one and twenty. You may regret that fact, but you can't alter it. And, more than all—let me tell you—*I* know all the very curious provisions of your wife's will. You never condescended to ask me to keep silence, and I made you no promise. Drunken dog, indeed! And I could tell that which would turn this county bottom upwards! Suppose I were to tell Mrs. Blair to make herself easy; that those fools of lawyers made it so that one day, whether you die or marry, everything that was your wife's goes to your heirs—and she is your heir, because you've got no other relations. And Lewis Pryor—ah, Skelton, how many clever men overreach themselves! I know, too, that so bunglingly did these legal fools their work, that if you could prove that you had a son at the time of your wife's death, he would get the fortune. That fate was so desperately at work against common sense, that they forgot to put in whether he should be entitled to your name or not. But so cleverly have you made it appear that Lewis Pryor is the son of that lanky, sandy-haired tutor, that maybe you would have a hard time unravelling your own web. And so you think me a drunken dog, hey? All this I tell you is as clear as a bell in my—drunken mind, as you would call it."

Skelton's face had turned blue with rage while Bulstrode was speaking; but there was no way to make him stop, except pounding him with the chair. And then, Skelton wanted to find out how much Bulstrode really knew. Yes, he knew it all. Well might Skelton hate Blair and pursue his ruin. Either the Blairs must happen, by the most fortuitous accident, to fall into a great fortune at his death, or else the stigma that he had so carefully removed, as far as the world knew, from Lewis must be published in two countries. Fury and dismay kept him silent, but Bulstrode actually quailed under his eye when once Skelton had fixed it on him. Skelton spoke after a little pause:

"Your knowledge is entirely correct; and more, you are at liberty to proclaim it to the world any day you feel like it. The extraordinary part of it is that some wretch, as loose of tongue as you, has not by this time done so. It is a wonder that some creature, inspired by gratuitous ill-will towards that innocent boy, has not already published his shame. But the world, that is so forgiving and gentle to me, is already arrayed against him. The people in this county, for example, who seek the society of the owner of Deerchase, have condemned the innocent boy merely upon suspicion. It was so before I brought him here. No man or woman looked askant at me, but they put *him* beyond the pale. Bah! what a world it is!"

Bulstrode's courage and swagger had abated all the time Skelton had been speaking. It never could stand up against Skelton's coolness and determination. But some impulse of tenderness towards Lewis made him say:

"You need not fear for one moment that I would harm the boy. I too love him. Unlike the world, I hold him to be innocent and you to be guilty."

"Pshaw!" answered Skelton contemptuously, "you will not do him any harm until your heedless tongue begins to wag, when, in pure idleness and wantonness, you will tell all you know. However, the fact that you are about the only person in the world who takes a true view of the case, saves me from kicking you out of doors. You must see for yourself I love that boy with the strongest, strangest affection. It has been my punishment, to suffer acutely at all the contumely heaped upon him; to yearn for the only thing I can't give him—an equality with his kind; to feel like the cut of a knife every slight, every covert indignity put upon him. I tell you, had Blair and his wife done the simplest kind thing for that boy, I believe it would have disarmed me. But, no; they have flouted him studiously. Blair has never heard Lewis's name mentioned before me without a look that made me want to have him by the throat; and in return, he shall be a beggar." Skelton said this with perfect coolness, but it made a cold chill run down Bulstrode's backbone. "The least kindness, the smallest gentleness, shown that boy is eternally remembered by me, and I have too little, too little to remember. And shall I overlook the insolence of the Blairs towards him? Ah, no. That is not like me. The strongest hold you have over me, Bulstrode, is because I know you love that boy, and it would distress him to part with you. But I think I have had as much of your company as I care for just now, so go."

Bulstrode went immediately.

Skelton sat on the porch, or walked about it, far into the night, until his rage had cooled off. He had been subject to those tempests of still and almost silent passion all his life, and a fit of it invariably left him profoundly sad. The injustice to Lewis was inexpressibly hard to bear. He had all his life enjoyed so much power, prestige, and distinction, that the slightest contradiction was infinitely galling to him. One thing he had fully determined: the Blairs should not get that money. Rather would he proclaim Lewis's birth to the world. But with a thrill of pride, as well as pain, he realised that it would cruelly distress the boy. Skelton knew Lewis's disposition perfectly, and he knew the pride, the delicacy, the self-respect, that were already visible and would grow with the boy's growth. He felt convinced that Lewis would never willingly barter what he supposed to be his respectable parentage for all the money in the world. And what would be the boy's feelings towards *him?* Would not Lewis bear him a life-long hatred? And that suggestion which Bulstrode had thrown out about the difficulty of unravelling the story of Lewis's birth, which Skelton had constructed with so much ingenuity, yes—it must be done in his lifetime; he would not trust anything to chance. The game was up, as far as the Blairs were concerned. And then he might, if he chose, marry Sylvia Shapleigh. She would perhaps awake his tired heart, for he had gone through with some experiences that had left weariness and cynical disgust behind them. But that the Blairs should ever have what might be Lewis's, that they should profit by those fools of lawyers in England—Skelton almost swore aloud at the bare idea.

He revolved these things in his mind as he sat perfectly still in the corner of the porch after his restlessness had departed.

The moon rose late, but the round silver disc had grown bright before he stirred. He waked Bob Skinny, sleeping soundly on the back porch, to shut up the house, and went upstairs to his own rooms. As he passed through the upper hall he saw, to his surprise, Lewis Pryor sitting in the deep window seat, upon which the moonlight streamed.

"You here?" asked Skelton, surprised, yet in his usual kindly voice.

"Yes," answered Lewis, perfectly wide awake, and looking somberly at Skelton in the ghostly light. "I couldn't sleep for thinking of Mrs. Blair. I must win that race, and yet, if I do she will be unhappy, and that makes me unhappy. I wish we had never thought about the race, Mr. Skelton."

"Perhaps so," said Skelton lightly; "but remember, when you are riding a race you are representing a great many persons. If you win the race, Mr. Blair will have lost some money; and if Hilary Blair wins, a great many persons who have backed you will lose money. It is the most dishonourable thing on earth to willfully lose a race."

Lewis sighed, and understood very well.

"Come," said Skelton good-naturedly, "it is time for youngsters like you to be in bed. It is nearly one o'clock."

Lewis crept off quite dolefully to his bed, while Skelton, sad at heart, remained standing before the open window, gazing at the glittering moon that silvered the lovely, peaceful, and tender landscape.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE days that followed were days of torture to Elizabeth Blair. It was as if Blair could think of nothing but Alabaster and the famous match. It got out among the betting fraternity which infests every racing community that Blair had a superstitious faith in the black horse, and thereupon they beset him. Blair, in the coolest, most rational, and self-possessed way in the world, would give the most extraordinary odds, secretly goaded by the general disposition in favour of Jaybird. At home it seemed as if he had but one idea, and that was Alabaster. He was at the stables by dawn of day to see if the horse was all right, and the last thing he did at night was always to take a lantern and go into the horse's stall and examine everything carefully.

The creature, with tawny, vicious eyes, would back his ears and glare at him, pawing the ground and occasionally hitting a thundering blow with his hoof against the wooden partition of the stall. His coat was satin smooth. The black hostler declared solemnly: "Dat hoss, he see evils, I know he do. Sometimes, in de middle o' de night, I heah him whinnyin' an' gwine on, an' den he kick wid he hine foots; dat's a sho' sign."

One night Blair came in the house, where Mrs. Blair sat in the dimly lighted drawing-room, with Mary and Hilary beside her listening to her sweet talk, and, coming up to her, said, with pale lips, "Alabaster is off his feed to-night."

Elizabeth felt no inclination to laugh. Alabaster's appetite for his oats was of great importance to everybody at Newington then. Blair sat down heavily. His pallor and distress were so great that it moved Elizabeth to go to him and put her arms tenderly about him.

"Dearest," she said, "no matter how it goes, try—try—to give this up. See how much misery it has brought into our married life! It is well enough for men like Richard Skelton, to whom money is nothing, but to you it is different. Think of me—think of our children."

"Yes, I know," answered Blair drearily. "Here am I, an educated man, a gentleman, and I swear I spend more time in the society of stablemen and jockeys than anywhere else. It has brought me and mine to beggary almost, and yet—and yet, if Alabaster wins, as he must, it would be a shame not to make some more money out of him; and if he does not, it will be the purest, cursedest luck in the world—the creature has got it in him." And then Blair's face softened, and he took her hand, and said: "Do you know, Elizabeth, there is for me no pleasure on earth so great as that of getting the better of Skelton? and for that you must thank your own sweet self. The only woman he ever wanted to marry I took away from him; the only sport he cares for I have sometimes got the better of him.

Now he thinks to ruin me on the turf, but Alabaster's swift feet will save us yet, my girl."

Elizabeth said nothing, but turned away, sighing.

The strain upon Mrs. Blair's mind reacted upon her body. She became weak and bloodless, and entirely lost her appetite. She went about, silent as to her sufferings, but deathly pale, and Blair noticed with alarm that she not only did not eat but could not sleep. She persisted gently that nothing ailed her, and would not agree to see a doctor; but Blair became more distressed every day at her pallor and weakness. One night, on opening his wife's door, he saw her sitting at the window looking out into the dim, moonless night at the river that flowed darkly. Her attitude was so dejected that Blair was cut to the heart.

"Elizabeth," he said, "tell me—tell me, what is it that is wearing your life away?"

"Alabaster," answered Elizabeth, with a half smile.

"He is destroying *my* mind, I believe," Blair replied gloomily enough.

"Darling," said Elizabeth after a pause, and putting her hands on Blair's broad shoulders as he stood over her, "do you want to see me well, and fresh, and rosy once more?"

"God knows I do," responded Blair with energy.

"Then—then—make me a promise."

"Oh, I know what you mean," cried Blair with nervous impatience. "You mean to ask me to cringe to Skelton, and to abandon this match on some subterfuge or other, and manage it so that all bets will be declared off." In a moment he added: "Forgive me, Elizabeth, but a harassed man is not responsible for every word he says."

Elizabeth had not opened her mouth, but her look was enough to bring an immediate apology.

"What I do want—what would make me well—what would make me happy—is that you will promise me, after this, to give up racing. I have never asked this of you before, because I have not fully realised the terrible hold it had on you. But I tell you, in sober seriousness, that, beyond what you will bring upon yourself and our children, if this continues, I shall not live two years. My body is still strong, but my heart and my soul are both sick—sick—and I know that I could die of grief, and chagrin, and shame, and disappointment as readily as if I had been poisoned. I have struggled ever since you began this thing years ago, but lately I have yielded to despair. Now you can kill me or you can save my life."

Blair walked about the room with an agonised look on his fine, sunburned, expressive face. He believed every word that Elizabeth uttered. Presently he came up to her and cried:

"Elizabeth, will you promise to live and be happy if I promise you never to start another horse in a race after this one—never to back another horse?"

"Yes, I will give you my promise if you will give me yours."

"And," continued Blair, with a smile that had more pain than mirth in it, "will you promise me to smile again, and to look as cheerful as you used to look when we were first married, and to get back that pretty colour that you once had in your cheeks?

for I can't stand such a woe-begone-looking wife another day."

"I will promise you to be so young, so beautiful, so gay, that you will be amazed at me. I will not only smile, but laugh. I will never be jealous any more."

"My dear, don't say that," said Blair, really smiling then; "you can't any more help going into tantrums every time I look at a pretty girl than you can help breathing, and, besides, it diverts me very much."

"Very well, then; only promise. You know you have never broken your word to me, and your word is all I want."

"Then," said Blair, after a pause, "I promise."

He was still smiling, but there were drops upon his forehead. He was not unprepared for this, but it was a crisis with him. Elizabeth overwhelmed him with sweet endearments. Blair said truly, that it was the beginning of their second honeymoon.

Elizabeth bravely redeemed her promise. In one week a delightful change came over her. She tripped about the house singing. Her health returned with her spirits, and she regained in a few days what she had lost in as many weeks. Blair himself experienced a certain relief. He sat down one day and figured up the profits he had made out of his plantation within the time that he had kept his "horse or two," and he was startled at the result. But for that "horse or two" he would have been a rich man. He anticipated some terrible struggles in the future against his mania, but if only Alabaster won—and he *must* win—Blair would have accomplished his object. He would have got the better of Skelton, he would have won enough—in short, he would be just at the point where he could give up with dignity and comparative ease the sport that had so nearly ruined him.

The eventful day came at last—the closing day of the spring meeting. There had been four days of racing in perfect May weather, with splendid attendance and a great concourse of strangers. Skelton's stable had been very successful. Every day the two men met at the races and exchanged nods and a few words of ordinary courtesy. Sometimes Skelton drove over tandem; once he drove his four-horse coach, with Lewis Pryor on the box seat. He was always the observed of observers.

Mrs. Blair, on one pretext or another, refrained from attending the course upon any of the first four days, albeit they were gala occasions in the county; but on the final day, when the great match was to be run, her high spirit would not allow her to stay at home. She knew perfectly well that the whole county understood how things were with them, for in patriarchal communities everybody's private affairs are public property. They even knew that Blair had promised his wife that this should be the last—the very last—of his horse racing.

The day was very bright even for the bright Southern spring, and there was a delicious crispness in the golden air. As Elizabeth leaned out of her window soon after sunrise the beauty and peace around her lightened her weary heart. Newington had long fallen into a picturesque shabbiness, to which Elizabeth was quite accustomed and did not feel to be a hardship. At the back of the house her window opened upon what had once been a prim garden with box hedges; but the hedge had grown into trees, and the flowers and shrubs had long ago forgotten to be prim. Violets, that are natural vagabonds and marauders, bloomed all over the garden. Of gaudy tulips, there were ranks of bold stragglers that flaunted their saucy faces in the cold east wind, which slapped them sharply. There was an arbour nearly sinking under its load of yellow roses, that bloomed bravely until the December snows covered them. Down the river the dark-green woods of Deerchase were visible, with an occasional glimpse of the house through the trees. The Newington house faced the river, and a great ill-kept lawn sloped down to the water. It was quite a mile across to the other shore, and the water was steely blue in the morning light, except where a line of bent and crippled alders on the shore made a shadowy place in the brightness. And this home, so dearly loved in spite of its shabbiness, she might have to leave. What was to become of them in that event neither she nor Blair knew. He understood but one way of making a living, and that was out of the ground. He was essentially a landed proprietor, and take him away from the land and he was as helpless as a child. He might, it is true, become manager of somebody's estate, but that would be to step into a social abyss, for he would then be an overseer. In short, a landed man taken away from his land in those days was more helpless than could well be imagined.

Down by the stable lot Elizabeth saw a commotion. Alabaster had been fed, and the hostler was bringing him out of his stall for his morning exercise. He came rather more amiably than usual. Blair and Hilary were both there. Elizabeth could see Blair's tall figure outlined distinctly; he was standing meditatively with his hands in his pockets. Hilary watched the hostler put the saddle on Alabaster, then mounted, and rode off, the creature going along quietly enough.

When Blair came in to breakfast he wore a look of peace that Elizabeth had not seen for a long time on his face. Elizabeth, on the contrary, for once had lost some of her self-control. She was pale and silent, and could scarcely force a smile to her lips when her husband gave her his good-morning kiss.

"You look unhappy, Bess," he said, "but I am more at ease than I have been for a long time. Come what may, this day I am a free man. Never since I grew hair on my face have I not been in slavery to horses and stablemen and jockeys and the whole gang. Of course, it is no easy thing to give this up; it has had its recompenses. I haven't had many happier moments in my life than when Black Bess romped in ahead of Skelton's Monarch that day so many years ago. In fact, the pleasure of beating Skelton has been one of the greatest seductions of the whole thing. But when he put his mind to it he could beat me. Now, however, I don't propose to give him the chance again. That will be pretty hard on him, considering that he has poured out money like water to do it. From this day, my dear, I am no longer a racing man."

Elizabeth brightened at this. No matter what might come, there was no longer this terrible apprehension all the time of "debts of honour" hanging over them.

Mrs. Blair, being naturally rather vain and very proud, would have liked a splendid costume to wear on this momentous occasion, and a coach and four to drive up to the grand stand in. But her very best gown was shabby, and her carriage was on its last legs. However she looked remarkably well on horseback, and there was Black Bess, retired from the turf, but yet made a very fine appearance under the saddle. She concluded that she would go on horseback, and Blair would ride with her.

At one o'clock in the day the Campdown course was full, the grand stand crowded with all the gentry in the county, and everybody was on the tiptoe of expectation. It was no mere question of winning a race—it was whether Skelton would succeed in ruining Blair, or would Blair escape from Skelton. Skelton was on hand, having ridden over with Lewis. He was as cool, as distinguished looking, as immaculately correct as ever. People thought he had little at stake compared with Blair. But Skelton thought he had a great deal, for he had to have his vengeance then, or be robbed of it. He knew well enough that it was his last chance.

Tom Shapleigh was there, and Mrs. Shapleigh and Sylvia, who looked remarkably pretty, and everybody in the county, even Bulstrode, who dreaded the catastrophe, but who could not forbear witnessing it. Skelton, with Lewis close by him, walked about the quarter stretch and infield. Everybody received him courteously, even obsequiously, for Skelton was their local great man. But nobody took the slightest notice of Lewis beyond a nod. The boy, with a bursting heart, realised this when he saw Hilary Blair surrounded by half a dozen boys of his own age, and being petted by the women and slapped on the back and chaffed by the older men.

Presently they came to the Shapleigh carriage. Sylvia had been acutely conscious of Skelton's presence ever since he drove into the enclosure; and she also had seen the contempt visited upon the boy, and her tender heart rebelled against it. As Skelton and Lewis came up she turned a beautiful rosy red, and, after having had her hand tenderly pressed by Skelton, she opened the carriage door and invited Lewis to take a seat and watch the first events. Skelton declined an invitation of the same kind for himself, and chose to stand on the ground and have Lewis monopolise the front seat in the great open barouche. Mrs. Shapleigh had joined in Sylvia's cordial invitation, and so profoundly grateful was Skelton for it that he almost persuaded himself that Mrs. Shapleigh was not half such a fool after all. As for Sylvia, he thought her at that moment adorable; and there was certainly some distinction in her notice, because she was commonly counted to be the most spirited girl in the county, and one of the most admired, and Miss Sylvia had a quick wit of her own that could make her respected anywhere. Besides, old Tom was a man of consequence, so that the backing of the Shapleighs was about as good as anybody's.

Sylvia felt intensely sorry for Lewis, and sorry that she had ever sold Alabaster to Blair. The boy was very silent, and was wondering, painfully, for the hundredth time, why nobody ever noticed him scarcely. Sylvia tried to cheer him up. She pinned a rose from a bouquet she carried to his jacket. She even got out of the carriage and took a little stroll about the infield, with Lewis for an escort, leaving Skelton to the tender mercies of Mrs. Shapleigh. Sylvia knew well enough how to command civility for herself as well as for Lewis, and when people spoke to her she brought the boy in the conversation with a pointedness that could not be ignored. She returned after a while to the barouche with a light of triumph in her eyes. She had managed much better than Skelton, with all of his distinction and prestige, women being naturally much cleverer at social fence than men. Skelton could have kissed her hands in the excess of his gratitude. He smiled to himself as he thought: "How much more power have women than men sometimes! Here is this girl, that can circumvent the whole county, while I only fail in trying to bully it."

Everybody watched for the appearance of Jack Blair and Mrs. Blair, as the crowd waits for the condemned at an execution. At last they were seen entering the enclosure. Both of them were well mounted, and Mrs. Blair's black habit fell against the satin coat of Black Bess. She wore a hat and feathers and sat her horse like a Di Vernon. A delicate pink was in her cheeks, and her eyes, which were usually soft, were sparkling. If Skelton or anybody else expected her to show any signs of weakness, they were much mistaken. Blair was at his best on horseback, and he had become infected by his wife's courage. As they rode into the infield they were greeted cordially, Skelton coming up, hat in hand, to make his compliments to Mrs. Blair, who stopped her horse quite close to the Shapleigh carriage. The women spoke to each other affably. Lewis was still in the carriage as Skelton moved off. Mrs. Blair at that moment regretted as keenly as Sylvia that Alabaster had ever been heard of.

Old Tom was there then, all sympathy and bluff good-nature. He felt sorry for Mrs. Blair, and wanted to show it.

"How d'ye do, Mrs. Blair? Deuced brave woman you are to trust yourself on that restless beast!" for Black Bess, irritated by the people pressing about her, threw her head in the air and began to dance about impatiently.

"Why, this is the very safest creature in the county," answered Mrs. Blair, patting her horse's neck to quiet her. She was so smiling, so calm, that Tom Shapleigh was astounded.

"Look here, ma'am," he cried, "you're a mighty fine woman"—and then stopped awkwardly. Mrs. Blair fully appreciated the situation, and Black Bess, just then showing symptoms of backing into Mrs. Shapleigh's lap, a reply was avoided. Sylvia uttered a little cry, as Black Bess's hind feet scraped against the wheel and her long black tail switched about uncomfortably in the carriage.

"Don't be afraid," cried Mrs. Blair, with sarcastic politeness, "I can manage her."

"I hope so," devoutly answered Sylvia; and old Tom asked:

"Blair, why do you let your wife ride that restless creature?"

"Because I can't prevent her," answered Blair, laughing. "When Mrs. Blair wants Black Bess saddled she has it done. I'm the most petticoated man in the county."

At which Mrs. Blair laughed prettily. The henpecked men are never the ones who parade the fact openly.

The scene was very animated. The sun shone hotly upon the white track and the tramped infield and the crowds of carriages and horsemen. The women wore their gayest dresses, and in those days men were not confined to sombre black, and claret-coloured coats and blue coats and bottle-green coats were common enough. Skelton did not wholly devote himself to Sylvia, although Lewis still kept his place opposite her, but went about shaking hands with the men and making himself unusually agreeable to the women. In spite of the general knowledge that Skelton would lose the main part of his fortune if he married again, he was still an object of interest to the feminine contingent, who knew that Skelton was a good deal of a man whether he had a great fortune or not. He never went into the society of women, though, that he did not feel that bond of the dead woman upon his liberty. He loved his liberty so dearly, that not even that splendid fortune could wholly make up for it; he wanted all of the power of money, but he wanted to be as free as other men were; and as it was, he was not free, but a slave. And he had so much, that a crumpled rose-leaf troubled him. He could have made Lewis Pryor his heir, and he could have married Sylvia Shapleigh and have been rich and happy at Deerchase, but that would involve putting a stain upon Lewis; and that was the worst thing in the world except one—letting the Blairs have the money. But some day it must come; and he caught himself debating, in the intervals of talk with men and women, that, after all, he might not make a bad exchange—his fortune for Sylvia. As a matter of fact, his money, beyond a certain expenditure, did him very little good. He had all the books he wanted—more than were good for him, he sometimes suspected. He had some pictures and curios, but in those days the art of collecting was practically unknown. Of course, money implied a mastery of conditions, and that was the breath of his nostrils; but conditions could be mastered with less money than he had. If only Lewis could be spared the shame awaiting him! Skelton's eye sought him occasionally, as he still sat in the Shapleighs' barouche. Sylvia looked lovely to him then because she was so sweet to Lewis. Mrs. Blair, too, was watched by Skelton, and he was forced to admire her perfectly indomitable pluck. It was far superior to her husband's, who, after a brave effort to appear unconcerned as the saddling bell rung in the last race, finally dashed off, and, jumping his horse over the fence, disappeared amid the crowd of men in the paddock. Elizabeth gave a quick glance around, and for an instant a sort of anguish appeared in her expressive eyes. But in the next moment she was again easy, graceful, unconcerned. One would have thought it a friendly match between her boy and Lewis Pryor on their ponies. Lewis had then disappeared, of course, but by some odd chance Skelton was close to Mrs. Blair. He saw that she was in a passion of nervousness, and he had pity enough for her to move away when the horses were coming out of the paddock and the boys were being weighed. But just then Blair rode up to his wife's side. His face was flushed, and he had a triumphant ring in his voice as he said to Elizabeth, while looking at Skelton sharply:

"The boy is all right. I saw the horse saddled myself, and Hilary knows what to do in any emergency."

Skelton knew perfectly well, when Blair said "the boy is all right," he meant the horse was all right. Blair's face was menacing and triumphant; he began to talk to Skelton, who at once took it as a challenge to stay. Blair thought Skelton bound to lose, and those savage instincts that still dwell in every human breast came uppermost. At the moment, he wanted to enjoy his triumph over Skelton. Exactly the same thoughts burned in Skelton's mind. An impulse of pity would have made him spare Mrs. Blair the pain of his presence, but he could feel no pity for Blair.

The two horses were now prancing before the grand stand. Jaybird was a magnificent, clean-limbed bay, with an air of equine aristocracy written all over him. He was perfectly gentle, and even playful, and apparently knew quite well what was up. Lewis, his dark boyish face flushed, cantered him past the grand stand, and to the starting post, where Jaybird stood as motionless as a bronze horse. But not the slightest welcome was accorded Lewis Pryor. Not a cheer broke the silence, until old Tom Shapleigh, in his strident voice, sent up a great "Hurrah!" A few faint echoes followed. But one handkerchief was waved, and that was in Sylvia Shapleigh's hand. Skelton, whose feelings during this could not be described, observed that Sylvia's eyes were full of tears. The cruel indifference of the world then present was heart-breaking. Lewis, with his face set, looked straight before him, with proud unconsciousness even when a storm of applause broke forth for Hilary Blair.

Alabaster's behaviour was in total contrast to Jaybird's well-bred dignity. He came out of the paddock kicking and lunging, and only the most perfect horsemanship on Hilary's part kept him anywhere within bounds. The applause seemed to madden him; he reared, then came down on his front feet, trembling in every limb, not with fear but with rage. But, as Blair had said, he might as well try to throw a grasshopper as Hilary. The boy's coolness and admirable management only caused the more applause, and this still more excited the black horse. Hilary was forced to give him a turn half way around the course to bring him down. During all this, poor Lewis sat like a statue at the starting post. Jaybird had had his warming-up gallop before, and Lewis felt that it would be like an effort to divide the applause of the crowd if he showed the bay off during Alabaster's gyrations. But what would he not have given for some of the kind glances that were showered upon Hilary!

Mr. and Mrs. Blair were still close to the Shapleighs, and Skelton was standing between them and the carriage. He glanced towards Sylvia and saw the troubled look in her eyes.

"Are you losing faith in your young admirer?"

asked Skelton, smiling, and moving a step towards the carriage,

"No," answered Sylvia, "but—but—why did I ever let Mr. Blair have Alabaster! Perhaps I have done him the greatest injury of his whole life."

"No, you have not," replied Skelton, in his musical, penetrating voice, which Blair, whose attention was abnormal that day, could hear distinctly; "you have probably done that which will cure Mr. Blair of racing the entire rest of his life."

Blair heard the reply and surmised the question. He smiled insultingly at Skelton, who, however, possessed in perfection the power to appear unconcerned when he wished it.

The two horses were now at the post, and the starter was making his way towards his place. There was an intense, suppressed excitement following the cheering that kept the whole crowd silent. Nearly everybody present had something on one horse or the other; and then, they all knew that it was more than a match between Jaybird and Alabaster—it was a life-and-death contest between Blair and Skelton. But then the starter was in place and was trying to get the horses off. Skelton longed to call Lewis to the fence and give him a few last words of advice, but as Blair did not speak to Hilary he could not bring himself to show less want of confidence in Lewis.

Hilary had the inside place. There was great difficulty in starting the horses, owing to Alabaster's ill humour, and they were turned back half a dozen times. Each time Elizabeth's heart grew fainter. Alabaster was becoming more wildly excited, and the bright gleam of the bit, as he champed it, throwing his head about fiercely, could plainly be seen. He had a way of getting the bit between his teeth, when he would stop short in his course and indulge in every wickedness known to horseflesh. If he ever began those performances after the flag fell he was gone. The Blairs watched, in the dazzling sunlight, Hilary stroking the horse's neck, saying encouraging words and trying to keep him down. At last, when they were turned back for the fourth time, Alabaster ducked his head, and, raising his forefoot, brought it down with a crash on the rickety fence that separated the track from the infield. Elizabeth trembled visibly at that, and Blair ground his teeth. That pawing performance was always the beginning of the horse's most violent tantrums.

Jaybird, who was well bred as well as thoroughbred, was in agreeable contrast to Alabaster. He was perfectly manageable, although eager, and showed not the slightest temper or nervousness.

At last a cheer rose. They were off. Skelton had had his horse brought, and had mounted so as to see the course better. Old Tom Shapleigh stood up in the barouche for the same purpose. The race was to be once around the mile-and-a-quarter track, with four hurdles and two water jumps. As soon as the horses were fairly started Alabaster began to lag sullenly. He had got the bit between his teeth and was champing it furiously, the foam flowing in all directions. Jaybird had taken the inside track, and was going along easily. He could win in a canter if that sort of thing was kept up. Still, Hilary did not touch Alabaster with either whip or spur. "Great

God!" cried old Tom, who had some money on Alabaster, to nobody in particular, "why doesn't the boy give him the spur?"

"Because," said Mrs. Blair in a sweet, composed voice, "he is in a temper, and to be touched with a spur would simply make him more unmanageable than he is now. My son knows what to do, you may depend upon it."

Elizabeth was scarcely conscious of what she was saying, but nobody should find fault with Hilary then. Skelton, chancing to meet her glance at that moment, mechanically raised his hat. There was a woman for you! Blair leaned over and grasped the pommel of his wife's saddle, as if to steady himself. He was ashy pale and trembling in every limb.

There were two hurdles before the water jump. Alabaster did not refuse either hurdle, but at the water jump he swerved for an instant, only to take it the next moment. Hilary still showed the most wonderful self-possession; and as for Lewis Pryor, his intelligence in letting the sulky horse set the pace was obvious. Nevertheless, he was wary, and was drawing ahead so gradually that Jaybird actually did not feel the strain upon him. He had taken all three jumps like a bird. Alabaster was running along, his head down and his ears backed. The thousands of people with money on him watched him with a kind of hatred. One old fellow, who had perched himself on the fence, took off his battered beaver, and, as Alabaster passed him, he suddenly threw the old hat full at the horse, shouting, "Run, you rascal, run!"

Blair, who saw and heard it across the field, uttered a slight groan; Elizabeth grew, if anything, more ghastly pale than before. They both thought the horse would stop then and there and begin his rearing and pitching. The effect, though, was exactly the contrary. Alabaster suddenly raised his head, cocked his ears, and went in for the race. Blair gave a gasp, and the crowd another cheer; now there was going to be a race in earnest.

The horse lengthened his stride, and the bit, which he had hitherto held on to viciously, slipped back into his mouth. Hilary touched him lightly with the spur, and in half a dozen strides he was up to Jaybird, who was still going steadily.

Skelton was afraid that Lewis would lose his head and go blundering at the hurdles. But he did not; he lifted the horse over them beautifully, a little in advance of Alabaster, who went at them furiously, and knocked them both down. It was neck and neck to the water jump. Both horses were then flying along. Alabaster's black coat was as wet as if he had been in the river, but Jaybird gave no sign of distress. As they neared the jump, Alabaster increased his stride superbly. It was plain what Jaybird could do, but it was a mystery still how much speed the half-bred horse had. Alabaster rushed at the water jump as if he were about to throw himself headlong into it, and cleared it with a foot to spare; Jaybird followed a moment after. His hind feet slipped as he landed on the other side, and it was a half minute before he recovered his stride. Alabaster was then three lengths ahead, and Hilary was giving him whip and spur mercilessly. Nothing that Jaybird had yet showed could overcome those three lengths at the magnificent rate the black horse was going.

The crowd burst into a mighty shout: "Alabaster wins! Alabaster! Alabaster!"

Blair experienced one of the most delicious moments of his life then. He turned and looked Skelton squarely in the eye. He said not a word, but the look was eloquent with hatred and triumph. Skelton faced him as quietly as ever. Blair turned his horse's head; the race was his—Newington was saved—*he* was saved!

"Mr. Blair," said Skelton, at that instant, in his peculiar musical drawl, and with a smile that showed every one of his white, even teeth, "your boy is down."

Blair glanced towards the track, and the sight seemed to paralyse him. Alabaster was rolling over, struggling violently, with both forelegs broken and hanging. He had slipped upon a muddy spot, and gone down with frightful force. It was terrible to see. Hilary was lying perfectly limp on the ground, some distance away. The people were yelling from sheer excitement, and in a second a crowd had run towards the prostrate horse and boy. Blair found himself, he knew not how, on the spot. Some one shouted to him: "He's alive—he breathes—he's coming to!"

Before waiting to hear more about Hilary, Blair ran up to the struggling horse, and, with the savage instinct that had seemed to possess him all along regarding the creature, stamped his foot violently a dozen times in its quivering flank. The horse, half dead, sank back and ceased its convulsive efforts, fixing its glazing eyes on Blair with a dumb reproach. Blair, struck with shame and horror and remorse at his action, knelt down on the ground and took the horse's head in his arms.

"My poor beauty!" he cried, "my poor beauty!"

Mrs. Blair had sat bolt upright in her saddle, looking before her with unseeing eyes, until Blair kicked the dying horse; then, without a word or a cry, she fell over. Skelton caught her in his arms. He laid her down upon the grass, and Sylvia Shapleigh, jumping out of the carriage, ran to her. People crowded around. Here was a tragedy for the Blairs with a vengeance—Hilary perhaps killed, Blair ruined and making a brute of himself before the whole county, and Mrs. Blair falling insensible. It was ten minutes before she opened her eyes, and then only when Lewis Pryor, making his way through the people surrounding her, threw himself beside her and cried, "Dear Mrs. Blair, it was not my fault; and he is alive! he is alive!"

The boy's dark face was grimed with dust and tears. As Skelton looked at him, the feeling that it might have been Lewis who was thrown made him long to open his arms and hold the boy to his heart. But he did not; he only gave him a slight pat on the shoulder. Lewis was crying a little, completely overcome by the excitement. Everybody, particularly those who had lost money on Alabaster, scowled at him. But Sylvia Shapleigh, drawing the boy towards her, took her own white handkerchief and wiped his eyes, and entreated him to control himself. Skelton, on seeing that, vowed that, if ever he married, it would be to Sylvia Shapleigh.

Mrs. Blair, although more than half conscious by that time, yet could not take it all in. She seemed to be lingering on the borders of a dim world of peace and sweet forgetfulness, and she dreaded to come back to the pain and stress from which she had just escaped for a moment or two. All at once everything returned to her with a rush. She saw Hilary go down. She saw Blair's furious and insane action. She uttered a groan and opened her eyes, which at once fell on Skelton's.

It was one of the most painful moments of Skelton's whole life. He did not relish taking vengeance on a woman.

Mrs. Blair, as if inspired by a new spirit, sat up, and disdaining Skelton's arm, and even Mrs. Shapleigh's or Sylvia's, rose to her feet. Just then Blair came up. In ten minutes he had aged ten years. He had had a crazy moment or two, but now he was deadly calm and pale.

"The boy is all right," he said. As a matter of fact, Hilary was far from all right, but Blair did not intend to tell Mrs. Blair then. "Mr. Bulstrode has already put him in his chaise, and will take him home. Do you feel able to ride home?"

Sylvia and Mrs. Shapleigh and old Tom at once offered the barouche. Skelton had withdrawn a little from the group, to spare Mrs. Blair the sight of him.

Mrs. Blair declined the carriage rather stiffly. She was a strong-nerved though delicately made woman, and she meant to go through with it bravely.

"No," she said, "I will ride."

Something in her eye showed all of them, including Blair, that it was useless to protest. Her husband swung her into the saddle, and she gathered up the reins in her trembling hands. Meanwhile her eye fell upon Lewis, standing by Sylvia Shapleigh, his eyes still full of tears.

"Please forgive me, Mrs. Blair," he said.

"There is nothing to forgive," she answered, feeling, in the midst of her own distress, the acutest sympathy for the lad; "it was purely an accident. I hope you will come to see Hilary."

Lewis thanked her, with tears in his voice as well as his eyes.

Mr. and Mrs. Blair rode off the field together. People gave them all the room they wanted, for they were encompassed with the dignity of misfortune. They did not take the main road, which was full of people in gigs and chaises and carriages and on horseback, all talking about the Blairs' affairs and Skelton and everything connected with them. They took a private road through the woods that led to the Newington lane. Mrs. Blair did not know whether Alabaster were dead or alive.

"What has become of the horse?" she asked presently.

"Shot," replied Blair briefly.

Mrs. Blair looked at him intently, to see what effect this had on him, but strangely enough his face wore a look of relief, and his eyes had lost the hunted expression they had worn for months.

"But I thought you loved that horse so—so superstitiously."

"So I did. It was a madness. But it is past. I am a free man now. If the horse had lived and had won the race, sometimes—sometimes I doubted if I could have kept my word. But it is easy enough now. We are ruined, Elizabeth; that's what running away with Jack Blair has brought you to, but after this you can never reproach me again with racing. It has been your only rival; and I tell you, my girl, it is you that has made Skelton and me hate each other so."

What woman could be insensible to the subtile flattery contained in such language at such a time? Elizabeth at that instant forgave Blair every anxiety he had made her suffer during all their married life, and professed a perfect willingness to run away with him again under the same circumstances. One thing was certain, she could believe what Blair told her; he never lied to her in his life, and his word was as dear to him as his soul.

CHAPTER XV.

Lewis Pryor was in the greatest distress over the result of the match, and in riding back to Deerchase, by Skelton's side, he was the most doleful boy that ever was seen. Skelton was in a violent fury over the treatment accorded the boy, and felt like marrying Sylvia Shapleigh out of hand and establishing her at Deerchase for the purpose of spiting the other women in the county.

Next morning Lewis asked Bulstrode if he might ride over to Newington to inquire after Hilary and Mrs. Blair.

"Deuced if I know," answered Bulstrode. "I haven't the least objection; but you'd better ask Mr. Skelton."

Lewis, without saying a word to Skelton, got on his pony and rode to Newington. Blair met him at the door, and for the first time he laid aside the freezing air he had always maintained towards the boy and was extremely cordial. Hilary was far from all right; the horse had rolled on him, and it would be some time yet before they could tell how badly hurt he was. Mrs. Blair felt better, but was a good deal shaken by the shock. Lewis was so overcome at this that Blair felt sorry for the boy, and said:

"However, come in the house. Mrs. Blair would like to see you; and Hilary, too, if he is able."

Lewis walked into the house for the first time in his life, and sat down alone in the drawing-room. In a few moments Blair came to fetch him, and conducted him to Hilary's room. Mrs. Blair sat by the bed on which Hilary lay, and as soon as Lewis entered she rose and went towards him with much sweetness of manner. Hilary, too, welcomed him feebly. Poor Lewis could hardly refrain from tears. He felt himself the author of more grief and pain to other people than anybody in the whole world. And he even envied Hilary, lying helplessly in the bed. His mother watched him fondly; his father sat by him—and it was always a pretty sight to see Blair with his children; while little Mary promised Hilary that, if he should be a cripple for life, she would abandon all ideas of matrimony and devote her life to him. The little girl, who was uncommonly pretty, was disposed to regard Lewis as an enemy, but was finally coaxed into magnanimity, and even condescended to sit on his knee.

When Lewis rose to go, Mrs. Blair accompanied him to the door. He made her a thousand earnest apologies, to which Mrs. Blair replied generously. Even Blair himself was kind to the boy, who left them with an overflowing heart. Hilary had asked him to come again, and both Mr. and Mrs. Blair had repeated the invitation.

Skelton, sitting at Deerchase in the library, was triumphant, but far from happy. Towards noon he missed Lewis, and happening across Bulstrode in the stone porch, he inquired for the boy.

"Don't know," answered Bulstrode, adding, with a grin: "He asked me about going to Newington. I told him I had no objection, and advised him to ask you—and by the Lord Harry! I shouldn't be surprised if he had gone."

A very little inquiry showed that Newington was precisely where Lewis had gone. Bulstrode was secretly much amused.

"Birds of a feather—Skelton and Lewis. The boy is giving him a dose of his own medicine."

All Skelton said was to direct the servants immediately upon Lewis's arrival to let him know.

When Lewis appeared he was met by Bob Skinny, who directed him mysteriously to "de libery. An' Mr. Skelton, he f'yarly sizzlin', he so mad."

Lewis walked into the library quite coolly. Skelton wheeled around and said, in a voice very unlike his usual almost caressing tone:

"Have you been to Newington, Lewis?"

"Yes, sir," answered Lewis calmly.

"I considered it unnecessary to tell you not to go, as you know, of course, the relations between Mr. Blair and myself are not cordial; and it never occurred to me that you would go off in this manner, in direct defiance of what you know must be my wishes."

"I asked Mr. Bulstrode, sir," answered Lewis in a very soft, composed voice. "He told me he had no objection. It's true he advised me to ask you; but Mr. Bulstrode is my guardian, and when I have his permission I don't need anybody else's, sir."

Lewis had in perfection Skelton's trick of expressing the utmost defiance in the most moderate tone.

There was nothing approaching insolence in his manner, but a perfect knowledge of his rights and a determination to stand upon them. Skelton was entirely at a loss for a moment or two. He had not the slightest means of enforcing obedience from the boy, except a threat of sending him away from Deerchase, and he suspected that was just what would have pleased Lewis best. But he spoke in a tone of stern command that he had never used towards the boy before.

"Mr. Bulstrode seems to have had the right conception of the respect you owe me," he said, after a pause, "but I find you did not heed his very rational advice. Now, understand me distinctly: I do not intend that you shall go to Newington, and I shall find means to enforce my wishes."

Lewis bowed and went out. He could not disregard anything so positive as that.

But after Lewis had gone out and Skelton was left alone with his anger, he could not but feel proud of the boy's spirit and independence, as well as his shrewdness in getting Bulstrode's half permission. It was no ordinary boy that could coolly go against Skelton's wishes and then so aptly justify himself. Skelton felt proud of Lewis's spirit even when it was directed against himself.

Hilary Blair did not get well at once—indeed, it looked at one time as if he would never get well at all. Then, there was an execution out against Blair, and, altogether, the affairs of the family seemed to be about as desperate as could be. Conyers need no longer preach sermons against horse racing. Jack Blair's case was an object lesson that was worth all the sermons ever preached. Still Conyers felt it his duty to add warning to warning, and he gave his congregation another discourse against gambling and betting of all sorts that was received much more respectfully than the former one. Even old Tom Shapleigh forgot to scoff. It is true that remorse, or rather regret, had much to do with old Tom's feelings. But for that unlucky horse, which he had so proudly exhibited to Blair, and that equally unlucky agreement to leave the matter to Sylvia, when Blair could always talk the women around, he would not have been minus a considerable sum of money. Sylvia herself endured all the distress that a tender and sensitive soul would suffer who had, however innocently, become a contributor to such a tragedy.

"I wish I had poisoned the horse," groaned old Tom.

"I wish so, too," devoutly added Sylvia.

"I'm sure I'm sorry Mr. Blair lost his money; but you know, Mr. Shapleigh, poisoning horses is a great sin," remarked Mrs. Shapleigh.

Old Tom reformed so far as to again attend the vestry meetings, and to lower his voice while he talked horse to his fellow-vestrymen.

The consideration with which Skelton and Bulstrode treated the poor harassed clergyman sensibly improved his relations with the congregation, which did not like him any better, but who treated him more respectfully. But they were all just as fond of morality and shy of religion as ever, except Sylvia Shapleigh. She and Conyers occasionally talked together on the great subject, but neither could enlighten the other. They were like two travellers meeting in the desert without map or compass—they could only tell of their loneliness, their struggles, their terrible ignorance of which way lay the road to light.

Bulstrode, upon whose movements Skelton never attempted to place any restrictions, went over to Newington occasionally, and was nearly brokenhearted by all he saw. He came back, and his mind dwelt constantly on Mrs. Blair and her troubles. He began to long that he might tell her not to despair—that there was still a great chance in store for her—that one day she, or perhaps her children after her, might have a fortune that would make them the richest people in the county; for Bulstrode had spoken truly when he said that he had very grave doubts whether Skelton himself could unravel the web he had so carefully woven about Lewis Pryor's identity. And his object in so doing—to deprive the Blairs of what might come to them, by an extraordinary conjunction of circumstances—was of itself open to suspicion. Bulstrode knew that in England the Blairs' expectations, even though saddled with uncertainties, would be worth something in ready money, where ready money was plentiful; but in this new country, where money was the dearest and scarcest of all products, he doubted if a penny could be realised upon even a very great fortune in perspective. He thought over these things until his brain was nearly addled.

One night in June, while Hilary was still ill, and the Blairs were liable to be dispossessed at any moment, Bulstrode went over to Newington. It had lately stormed, and the warm night air was full of the fragrance of the summer rain. The dripping trees along the road were odorous, and the wild honeysuckle and the great magnolia blossoms were lavish of perfume. The river and all the homesteads were perfectly still; and the only sound, as Bulstrode walked up the weedy drive to the Newington house, was the occasionally monotonous cry of a night bird or the soft flutter of bats' wings through the darkness.

Mrs. Blair was sitting in the dimly lighted drawing-room with one of Scott's novels on her lap. She heard Bulstrode's step on the porch, and rose to meet him as he entered the room. She looked pale and depressed.

"Ah, romance, romance," said Bulstrode, picking up the book. "You dear, sweet, innocent-minded creatures live on it."

"Yes," answered Mrs. Blair, smiling a little. "It helps us over the stony part of the road. I have been with my boy all day, and I found I wanted a tonic for my mind; so I took up this book, and actually forgot my poor Hilary for a few moments."

"Is the boy improving, ma'am?"

"I am afraid not. He cannot yet leave his bed. His father and I are with him all the time, one or the other. Do you know, Mr. Bulstrode, I never realise what an admirable man my husband is until I see him with his children. If you but knew how tender and interesting and even fascinating he is to them! And if only Hilary—gets well—" Mrs. Blair's voice broke. "Ah, Mr. Bulstrode, I fear so much—I fear—he will never be well—although—I try—"

Mrs. Blair burst unexpectedly into tears. This nearly distracted Bulstrode. He took out his handkerchief and fairly blubbered, saying between gasps:

"Now, pray don't, my dear Mrs. Blair—my sweet, sweet creetur'—" Bulstrode's grief was inexpressibly ludicrous.

But after a moment or two Mrs. Blair recovered herself and apologised for her sudden weakness.

"I have had much to try me," she said, "and then the prospect of being turned out of this place—"

"Have you made any arrangements to go elsewhere?" asked Bulstrode.

Mrs. Blair shook her head. "My husband would not ask it of his creditors, but it would be to his advantage if he were allowed to remain at Newington. He has really done wonderfully well here, and has made crops that were much better than any his father ever made off the place. It has all gone, of course, on the Campdown track—but still the money was made; and now that my husband is done with the turf for ever, I believe in a few years' time he could be on his feet again.

"I suppose you are attached to this place?" continued Bulstrode.

"Yes," cried Mrs. Blair with tears in her voice. "I don't know why especially, except that I am prone to become attached to places and people. And, remember, I have lived here ever since I began to think and feel. It seems to me that the troubles I have had tie me to it as much as the joys, and they have been many, Mr. Bulstrode. They were not the griefs you read about in books, but those plain everyday sorrows that come to women's hearts."

Mrs. Blair stopped; she had uttered no complaint heretofore, and the habit of forbearance was strong upon her. She went to the window and looked out. The clouds had melted away and a summer moon shone fitfully, flooding the river with its silver light. She was recalled by hearing her name uttered by Bulstrode in a curious voice. She resumed her chair and turned her delicate profile towards Bulstrode.

"Mrs. Blair," said he hesitatingly, "have you never speculated upon what becomes of Skelton's fortune from his wife if he should marry again, or at his death? for you know, of course, that it is only his until one of those things happens."

"We have heard a great deal of talk, but, naturally, we feel a delicacy at making any enquiries about it."

"Delicacy be hanged!" cried Bulstrode, rising. "Do you know, ma'am, that it's quite possible—quite probable—that some day you and your children will have all that money?"

"I cannot think that," answered Mrs. Blair, rising, too, and supposing that Bulstrode meant that Skelton might leave it to them. "Although I am Mr. Skelton's nearest relative, there is no love lost between us—and my husband and he are at feud. I am sure Mr. Skelton would never wish us to benefit by anything he had."

"But," cried Bulstrode excitedly, "he can't help it—he can't help it! Don't you suppose he would if he could?"

Mrs. Blair turned very pale. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean," said Bulstrode, in his impressive voice, "I mean that by the fondness of a woman Skelton became possessed of a great fortune; and by her jealousy it is only his until his death or marriage; and by her folly it all descends to his heirs. He cannot control one shilling of his wife's fortune—it goes to his heirs. And you—*you*—*you* and your children are Skelton's heirs!"

Mrs. Blair was completely dazed by what she heard and by Bulstrode's vehemence. His agitation, too, was contagious. She felt herself trembling, because she saw Bulstrode's tremor.

"What do you mean?" she stammered.

"What I say," replied Bulstrode, grasping her arm. "I've known it ever since Mrs. Skelton died. Of course, it wasn't her intention that it should be so; she was actuated by two master passions, love and hate. She meant Skelton to have the property, and that her own relatives, in punishment for the stand they took at her marriage, should suffer for it. She had the will made soon after her marriage, when she hoped that Skelton's heirs would be their children. It was the worst-made will ever seen in England. In her last illness she made additions to it, that only complicated matters more. It was such a muddle that Skelton was forced to apply to the courts to construe it, with a result that infuriated him. He is a bond slave in the midst of all that money. He has his choice of two things, one of which may be impossible; the other is, to hand over to you and yours three fourths of his money—and he must do it if he marries again, and his executors must do it if he dies. Just imagine this state of things upon a man of Skelton's temperament! Great

God! I wonder he hasn't gone mad thinking over it!"

Mrs. Blair sat quite silent and still. Bulstrode began to march about the room, running his hand through his shaggy hair and exclaiming at intervals, "Great Cæsar!" "Immortal Jove!" "Gadzooks!" Then turning towards her, he cried: "But there is another factor in it—another complication"—he came close to Mrs. Blair, and whispered:

"Lewis Pryor."

Mrs. Blair started, and a rosy blush succeeded her paleness.

"You know, the old Greeks had a word for such children as Lewis Pryor. They called them 'the children of the soul.' Now, the fool of a solicitor who drew Mrs. Skelton's will, in securing the reversion of the property to the children of Richard Skelton, did not provide at all against any children that he might have had when he married Mrs. Skelton. Good God! madam, did you ever know such a concatenation of follies and misunderstandings and mistakes? Scarcely a single design of Mrs. Skelton's is carried out; and either you must get the property, or Skelton must acknowledge Lewis Pryor. But," continued Bulstrode, his voice rising to a shout, "the end of difficulties is not yet. Great Jupiter! all the ingenuity of man could not bring about such strange complications as blind Fate would have it. Skelton took such pains to make Lewis Pryor out to be the son of his old tutor and his wife, and they became so fond of the boy, that among them all they obliterated every proof that Lewis Pryor was anything but Lewis Pryor. There stands the testimony of the

Pryors in their wills leaving their little belongings to their 'beloved son, Lewis'—not a word said about adoption. They lived in terror that Skelton would some time or other take the boy away from them, and they meant to make a fight for him. Skelton then was as anxious as they were that the secret should be kept. He made them a handsome allowance, but he was so astute about it that not even *that* could be proved. Never man so overreached himself as Richard Skelton. The Pryors both died when Lewis was about five years old. Skelton sent for him—from an awakening sense of duty, I fancy—and immediately conceived such a passion of paternal love as you never saw in your life, and could never part with him afterwards. You love your boy; Skelton idolises his."

Bulstrode had stopped his agitated walk while telling this, but he began it again, his lumbering figure making grotesque shadows on the wall. Mrs. Blair listened, overwhelmed as much by Bulstrode's manner as by the strange things he was telling her. Presently he came, and, sitting down by the table, brought his fist down so hard that the candles jumped.

"But there is more—actually more. If Skelton ever tries to prove that Lewis is his son, mark my words, the boy will fight against it—he will fight against it. I can't make out what he really thinks now, but he clings so hard to his Pryor parentage, he speaks of it so often, he treasures up every little thing that he inherited from the Pryors, that sometimes I fancy he has doubts. He is always anxious to disclaim any authority Skelton asserts over him.

The Pryors and Skelton in the beginning, supposing I knew nothing about the boy, agreed in making me the boy's guardian. Skelton knows that he has me under his thumb—and he has, by George! However, he can't kick me out of the house, no matter how much he would like to, so long as I am Lewis Pryor's guardian. But if I were called upon to-morrow in a court of law to say that Lewis is Skelton's son, I would have no better proof than Skelton's word; and the Pryors told me dozens of times that the boy was theirs. Pryor was an astute fellow, and, although both he and his wife knew they could not hoodwink me, they were careful never to admit to me that the boy was anything but theirs. You see, if Skelton had tried to get him away in their lifetime, he couldn't have proved anything by me." Bulstrode paused for breath and wiped his face.

"The boy has eyes like Richard Skelton's," said Mrs. Blair, after a pause.

"Exactly. But, although he is the same type, and one would use the same terms in describing Skelton and Lewis, they are not personally very much alike except their eyes. Strange to say, Lewis is not unlike Mrs. Pryor, who was a dark, slight woman. She always fancied him to be like a child she lost, and that was one reason she became so devoted to him. But to see Skelton and Lewis together in the same house—haw! haw!"

Bulstrode broke into a great, nervous laugh. "*Then* you'd know they were father and son. To see that little shaver stand up straight and eye the great Mr. Skelton as coolly as you please—odd's my life, madam, the brat is a gentleman, if I ever saw one! You ought to see the positive air with which he disclaims any relationship to Skelton when strangers have asked him about it. That, too, makes me suspect that he dreads something of the sort. It would be more natural if he should show a boyish desire to be related to Skelton and to share his consequence. He has a few books of Pryor's and a few trinkets of Mrs. Pryor's, and I don't believe all Skelton's money could buy those trifling things from him. But this haughty, naturally self-respecting spirit of the boy only makes Skelton love him the more. I have predicted to Skelton that the boy will hate him for ever if any disclosure is made about his birth. And Skelton dreads it, too. So you see, madam, in spite of all he can do—and he will do all that mortal man can do—you and yours may yet be rich through Skelton."

Elizabeth sat, roused out of her sad patience into trembling excitement. Of course, it was far off and doubtful, but it was startling. Bulstrode had not asked her not to mention it to her husband, nor would she have made any such promise. Presently Bulstrode rose to go. Elizabeth realised, without his mentioning it, that if it ever came to Skelton's ears what Bulstrode had that night told, Deerchase would never harbour him another hour, and she knew it was in pity for her griefs that he had told her at all. She tried to express this to Bulstrode, and he comprehended her.

He walked back to Deerchase oppressed with the reaction that follows excitement. Suddenly, as he trudged along the white and sandy road, under the pale splendour of the moon, he remembered Skelton's words: "You will not do the boy any harm until your heedless tongue begins to wag, and then in pure idleness and wantonness you will tell all you know." Yes, Skelton was right, as usual. He had not told it in idleness or wantonness, but he had told it. He could fancy Lewis's face if he had heard what had passed in the Newington drawing-room that night—the shame, grief, reproach, indignation. Bulstrode sighed, and went heavily upon his road home.

Mrs. Blair remained sitting in the drawing-room for some hours just as Bulstrode had left her. The candles burned out and the moonlight streamed through the open windows and made patches on the polished floor. A servant went about after a while, shutting the house up, when Mrs. Blair rose and went to her own room. As she passed Hilary's door everything was still, and she was afraid to open the door for fear it might wake him. She found herself unable to go to bed, though, and at midnight was sitting at her window looking out without seeing anything, although the moon was not yet gone.

Presently she heard Blair come softly out of Hilary's room and go down stairs into his own den, which was called by courtesy a study, but which was littered up with all the impedimenta of a country gentleman. Sometimes during the night watches, when the boy was sleeping, he would slip down there for a smoke. Nothing could exceed Blair's tenderness to his children, and when they were ill their exquisite fondness for him appeared to redouble.

He had just finished his first cigar when the door opened and Elizabeth entered with a candle in her hand. She had on a white dressing wrapper, and her long hair was plaited down her back. Blair knew in an instant from her face that something strange had happened.

She came forward and seated herself so that her head rested on his shoulder. Blair at once laid down the cigar he had just lighted. He did not hesitate to ask her to sign away her rights in everything they jointly possessed, but he was careful to treat her with every mark of the most perfect personal respect.

"Is Hilary asleep?" she asked.

"Soundly. He won't wake up until morning. You had a visitor. I heard Bulstrode's voice downstairs."

"Yes," answered Elizabeth.

Blair felt her begin to tremble, and asked her what was the matter.

"Only something Mr. Bulstrode told me," she answered, and then rapidly and excitedly poured it all out. She could always express herself with remarkable clearness, and Blair had no difficulty in understanding just how things were.

"And, although it will probably never benefit us," said Elizabeth finally, "for Richard Skelton is as likely to live as we are, yet it may some day benefit our children."

"But I don't see why it shouldn't benefit us," said Blair drily. "Nothing is easier than to get a copy of that will, and somebody can be found who will risk something upon such magnificent chances. I daresay Skelton himself would be glad to compromise with us for a handsome sum if we would convey all our interest in the property back to him."

Elizabeth listened, startled and annoyed. She had felt some qualms at the idea that, even if Lewis Pryor should make a successful fight for his supposed parentage, her children should inherit money that was only theirs through accident and bungling. But there was nobody else with any better right to it, for the late Mrs. Skelton had fully determined that her own family should not have it. And besides, it would be after Skelton's death—for she did not for a moment suppose that he would marry. But this way of setting up an immediate claim to it offended her. Being a singularly high-minded woman, she did not value money very greatly, and had many delicate scruples regarding it.

"But—but—you don't mean that you would take any steps—" she asked hesitatingly.

"Just wait and see," answered Blair promptly. "And Skelton may marry, remember. I think he admires Sylvia Shapleigh very much; and you may depend upon it, I sha'n't refuse anything that is mine."

Elizabeth for the first time in her life felt a little disgusted with him.

"I am afraid you are not as high-minded as I thought you," she said after a moment.

Blair withdrew his arm from around her with displeasure written all over his strong, expressive face. He began to finger his cigar, which was a hint that she had better leave him. Usually Elizabeth never remained a moment after she found she was trespassing, but to-night she sat quite still. A quarrel between two extremely refined, courteous, and attached persons is none the less bitter because each one is scrupulously polite. Blair said, after a few moments:

"Your remark is quite uncalled for, and let me tell you, Elizabeth, a man knows much more about these things than a woman. A man must be trusted to manage his own affairs; and if he is incapable, another man ought to be appointed his conservator."

Blair had mismanaged his own affairs so beautifully that this sentiment was peculiarly absurd coming from him. He glanced at Elizabeth and saw something like a half smile upon her face. She said nothing, but her silence was eloquent. Blair wished then for the thousandth time that Elizabeth would show her displeasure as other women did—with tears and unguarded words and reproaches, or even as Mrs. Shapleigh did.

"I believe," she said, after a long and painful pause, "that if the dead woman had her choice she would be very willing for Lewis Pryor to have the money, because Richard Skelton loves him so, and because she loved Richard Skelton so. But I am afraid—I am afraid—it has just occurred to me—that she would detest the idea of our having it, because Richard Skelton hates us so. And there cannot be any blessing attached to money that comes in that way."

"Damme!" cried Blair rudely.

Elizabeth rose at once. Like him, she was extremely dainty in her ideas of behaviour, and the only sort of henpecking she ever visited upon Blair was the strict account she held him to as regarded his manners to her, which, however, Blair was quite ready to accord usually. Even now he felt immediate remorse, and held out his hand.

"Forgive me," he said; "but it seems to me, Elizabeth, that we are saying very odd and uncomfortable things to each other to-night."

Elizabeth submitted to be drawn to him, and even to rest her head again upon his shoulder; but the quarrel between husband and wife had to be fought out as much as if they were a thousand miles apart. Blair tried some of his old flattery on her.

"You know I could not forbear any triumph over Skelton—and you know why. I want the money, but I want revenge, too; and revenge is a much more gentlemanly vice than avarice, as vices go. However, you never saw a man in your life who was indifferent to money."

"Yes, I have—Mr. Conyers."

"Pooh—a parson!"

"And Lewis Pryor. Mr. Bulstrode says he believes the boy will actually fight against being made Richard Skelton's heir, so much more does he value respectable parentage than money."

"Pooh—a boy!"

"And I assure you, that many things might make *me* regret we have that money, if it comes."

"Pshaw—a woman!"

"It may be that only parsons, boys, and women are indifferent to money; but if my son showed—as I hope he would—the same jealous solicitude for his honour and mine that Lewis Pryor does for his and his mother's, I should indeed be proud of him. Fancy," she said, raising herself and looking at Blair with luminous eyes, "the bribe of a great fortune being offered to Hilary if he would cast shame on his mother! And would I not rather see him dead before my eyes than yielding?"

Blair mumbled something about not being parallel cases.

"Then imagine yourself—all Richard Skelton's fortune yours"—Elizabeth waved her hands expressively—"all—all, if you will only agree that your mother was an unworthy woman."

Blair remained silent. Elizabeth was too acute for him then.

"Of course," he said after a moment, "I respect the boy for the spirit Bulstrode says he has shown, and I hope he'll stick to it. I hope he'll make a fight for it and come out ahead, and prosper, and have all the money that's good for him. Skelton has got a very handsome estate of his own to give him; and he may be master of Deerchase yet."

"And our little Mary may be mistress of Deerchase," said Elizabeth, who had a truly feminine propensity for concocting marriages for her children from their cradles.

"Never!" Blair brought his fist down on the arm of his chair. "She shall marry respectably or not at all; and though I like money, my daughter shall never marry any man who has no name to give her."

"Perhaps they may run away," remarked Mrs. Blair demurely, at which they both laughed a little, and Blair kissed his wife. But there was still battle between them. Mrs. Blair wanted the matter to rest; Blair wanted to agitate it immediately.

"Mr. Bulstrode meant to make me happy," she said bitterly, after a while; "but I doubt if he has. I even doubt, if that money comes to us, whether it may not do us more harm than good."

"I understand quite well what you mean," cried Blair, blazing up. "You think I will go back to horse racing, and gambling, and a few other vices. That is the confidence you have in my word. I tell you, Elizabeth, a man can't have any confidence in himself unless somebody else has some confidence in him; and a man's wife can make a scoundrel of him easier than anybody in the world."

"I did not suspect that I was calculated to make a scoundrel of a man," answered Elizabeth; and Blair taking out his watch ostentatiously and picking up his cigar again, she rose to go. Their voices had not risen beyond the most ordinary pitch, yet the first serious quarrel of their married life had come about. Blair relighted her candle for her, and held the door wide open until she had reached the top of the stair. He was very polite to her, but he was more angry with her than he supposed he ever could be. He was angry with her for the little she said, but more angry with her for the great deal she implied; and he meant to have some money on his expectations, if it were in the power of mortal man.

CHAPTER XVI.

BLAIR was as good as his word, and sent immediately to England for a copy of Mrs. Skelton's will. But in those days it was a matter of three months or more to get a thing of that kind attended to, and meanwhile affairs with him improved greatly. Old Tom Shapleigh, urged thereto by Sylvia, and also by Mrs. Shapleigh, who declared she never could tolerate a new neighbour at Newington, went quietly to work and bought up all of the most pressing claims against Blair. He knew that he could get as good interest on his money invested in Newington, under Blair's admirable management, as anywhere else; and, besides, he was fond of the Blairs, and anxious to do them a good turn for the very bad one of selling Alabaster to Blair. So Blair suddenly found himself very much better placed than he expected, and with an excellent chance, if he lived ten years, of paying off his debts. He also had a strange sense of relief when his race horses were sold, at the feeling that it was now out of his power to be a turfite any longer. It had always been a nightmare as well as a vampire to him, and fortunately it was one of those passions which have a body to them, and can therefore be destroyed, at least temporarily. His horses brought uncommonly good prices, which enabled him to pay some of the small debts that harassed him most. He began to think, with a sort of savage satisfaction, that what Skelton designed for his destruction might in the end be his salvation. Hilary, too, began to improve rapidly, and was in six weeks' time perfectly recovered. Mrs. Blair was amazed at the turn affairs took; but there was yet an unspoken, still antagonism between Blair and herself in regard to his course about the Skelton money. They had been so happy together for so many years that the mere habit of love was strong. The children saw no shadow between their father and mother, but nevertheless it was there, and it pursued them; it sat down by them, and walked with them, and never left them. Elizabeth, seeing how happy they might have been without this, conceived a tender, womanish superstition against the money that might be theirs. She had a faint, quivering doubt that much money might be Blair's destruction; and, anyhow, the mere hint of it had brought silent dissension between them, when nothing else ever had. Mrs. Blair, in the depths of her soul, heartily wished Bulstrode had never told her what he did, or that she had never told Blair. She had been able to hold up her head proudly before Richard Skelton in all the rivalry between him and her husband; but now, this unseemly looking after what might never be theirs and was never intended to be theirs, this hankering after dead men's shoes, made her ashamed.

What Skelton thought or felt nobody knew. He expressed, however, to Sylvia, great solicitude in speaking of Hilary Blair's recovery, and sent Bob

Skinny formally, once or twice, to ask how the boy was. Sylvia was making herself felt on Skelton's heart and mind; but, like a man, he put off entertaining the great guest as long as he could. And there was his engagement to the world to do something extraordinary. In the long summer days he was haunted by that unfulfilled promise. He was so tormented and driven by it, and by his inability to settle down steadily to his book, that he looked about him for some distraction. He found it only too often, he began to think, in Sylvia Shapleigh's soft eyes and charming talk.

Skelton was not averse to occasional hospitalities on a grand scale, and one day it occurred to him that he would give a great ball as a return for the invitations he had received.

On mentioning this embryonic scheme to Sylvia, that young woman received it with enthusiasm, and even slyly put Lewis Pryor up to reminding Skelton of it. Lewis, too, was immensely taken with the notion, and when Skelton found himself the victim of two such conspirators, he yielded gracefully enough. He declared that he would send for a man from Baltimore who knew all about balls, that he might not be bothered with it, and Sylvia forcibly encouraged him in everything calculated to make the ball a success. The man was sent for and plans were made, upon which Sylvia's opinion was asked—to Mrs. Shapleigh's delight and consternation and to old Tom's secret amusement.

" Mr. Shapleigh, the county will say at once that Sylvia is engaged to Richard Skelton, and then what shall we do ? "

"Do, ma'am? Do as the French do in a gale of wind."

"What is that, Mr. Shapleigh?"

"The best they can."

"Now, Mr. Shapleigh, why will you say such senseless things? Of course, there's nothing for us to do—nothing; and, although Richard Skelton is the greatest match in the county, even if he does have to give up his wife's money, yet there are drawbacks to him. You told me yourself he didn't believe in the devil."

"Well, he will if he ever gets married," responded old Tom, with an enormous wink.

The giving of a ball such as Skelton designed was in those days an undertaking little short of a crusade in the Middle Ages. A sailing vessel had to be sent to Baltimore for the supper, musicians, decorations, and everything the plantation did not supply; and it might return in one week, and it might return in two weeks, and it might never return at all. Sylvia Shapleigh hypocritically made light of these difficulties, and handsome cards were sent out to the whole county, including the Blairs. By some sort of hocus-pocus, Sylvia and Lewis obtained the privilege of addressing the invitations, so fearful were they of leaving Skelton a loophole of escape. It was done one June morning in the summerhouse on the bridge—Skelton sitting back smiling, while Sylvia and Lewis alternately conspired and squabbled. Skelton had a way of looking at Sylvia that always agitated her, although she thought she gave no sign of it. She had by this time acknowledged to herself that there were only two places in the world for her—the one where Skelton was, and the other where he was not. She had not, with all her native acuteness, the slightest idea what Skelton felt for her. True, he had a manner of paying her small attentions and compliments, insignificant in themselves, but which he invested with a deep and peculiar meaning. On this very morning, as she and Lewis chattered, Skelton sat looking at her with an expression of enjoyment, as if her mere presence and talk gave him exquisite pleasure. It did give him pleasure to see how much he dominated her; it was a royal sort of overbearing, a refined and subtle tyranny, that gratified his secret inordinate pride.

Sylvia confided in him that she was to have a new white-lutestring gown, and Mrs. Shapleigh had ordered a turban with a bird of paradise on it for the occasion. Nothing could exceed Sylvia's interest and delight, except Lewis's.

Bulstrode locked and barred himself in his room when Bridges, the functionary who was to arrange the ball, arrived from Baltimore. Skelton took refuge in the library, which was the one spot in the house upon which Bridges dare not lay his sacrilegious hands. But even the fastidious and scholarly Skelton could not wholly escape the domestic hullabaloo of a ball in the country. Lewis Pryor, at first delighted, soon found that if he showed his nose outside of the library he was pounced upon by Bridges—a saturnine-looking person, who had exchanged the calling of an undertaker for that of a caterer—and sent on an errand of some sort. Lewis, who was not used to this sort of thing, would have promptly resented it, except that it was for the great, the grand, the wonderful ball. Why he should be so anxious about the ball, he did not know; there was nobody to take any notice of him; but still, he wanted it, and Sylvia had promised to dance the first quadrille with him. This invitation was given far in advance, with a view of out-generalling Skelton.

Bob Skinny's disgust was extreme. The idea that he was to be superseded by a person of such low origin and inferior talents as Bridges was exasperating to the last degree.

"Dat ar owdacious Bridges man," he complained to Lewis, "he think he know ev'ything. He come a-countin' my spoons an' forks, an' he say, 'How many spoons an' forks has you got?' An' I say, 'Millions on 'em—millions on 'em; de Skeltons allers had more'n anybody in de worl'. I nuvver count all on 'em, myse'f.' *He* ain' nuvver been to furrin parts; an' when I ax him, jist to discomfuse him, ef he couldn' play on de fluke er nuttin', he say he ain' got no time fer sich conjurements. I tole him, maybe he so us' ter settin' up wid dade folks an' undertakin' dat he dunno nuttin' 'bout a party; an' he went an' tole Mr. Skelton. But Mr. Skelton, he shet him up. He say, 'Well, Bridges, I daresay you'll have to put up wid Bob Skinny. De wuffless rascal done had he way fur so long dat nobody now kin hardly conflagrate him.' So now, sence de Bridges man know my corndition, I jes' walks out in de g'yardin, a-playin' my fluke, an' when he sen' fur me, I tell him ter go long—I doan' do no wuk dese days; 'tain't none o' my ball—'tis his'n—an' ter be sho' an' doan' make no mistake dat it is a funeral."

As this was literally true, war to the knife was inaugurated between Bridges and Bob Skinny. Bob consoled himself, though, by promising that, when the musicians arrived, "I gwi' jine 'em, an' take my place 'longside de hade man, an' gwi' show 'em how I play de fluke fo' de Duke o' Wellingcome, an' de Prince Rejump, and Napoleon Bonyparte, an' all dem high-flyers dat wuz allus arter Mr. Skelton ter sell me ter 'em when we wuz 'broad."

Mrs. Shapleigh was in a state of much agitation, first, for fear the bird of paradise wouldn't come, and then for fear it wouldn't be becoming. Nor was Sylvia's mind quite easy until the new white-lutestring ball dress was an accomplished fact.

And at Newington, too, was much concern. An invitation had been sent to the Blairs, of course, and as Hilary was now on the highroad to recovery, there was no reasonable excuse for the Blairs not going. According to the hospitable customs of the age, to decline to go to a certain house was an acknowledgment of the most unqualified enmity. The resources of the people were so few, that to refuse an invitation to a festivity could only proceed from the most deadly ill-will. People who avowedly disliked each other yet kept up a visiting acquaintance, for, as they were planted by each other in perpetuity, they were forced to be wary in their enmities.

Blair and his wife discussed it amicably; they were more conciliatory and forbearing, now that there was an inharmonious chord between them, than before, when they had had their little differences, secure in their perfect understanding of each other. Blair promptly decided that they must go, else it would appear as if he were still unreasonably sore over his defeat. Mrs. Blair acquiesced in this. She could not, like Sylvia Shapleigh, have a new ball gown, but her white-silk wedding dress, that cherished gown, bought for her to be married to Skelton in, and in which she was actually married to Blair, was turned and furbished up for the occasion. Mrs. Blair felt the exquisite absurdity of this, and could not forbear smiling when she was engaged in her work.

The night of the ball arrived—a July night, cool for the season. By seven o'clock the roads leading to Deerchase were full of great, old-fashioned coaches, gigs, stanhopes, and chaises, bringing the county gentry to the grand and much-talked-of ball. Mrs. Shapleigh, whose remains of beauty were not inconsiderable, had begun making her toilet at three o'clock in the day, and was in full regalia at six. She had on a superb crimson satin gown, and the bird of paradise nodded majestically on her head, while she wore so many necklaces around her neck that she looked like a Christmas turkey. Old Tom was out in his best full dress, of swallow-tailed blue coat and brass buttons, with a fine lawn tie to muffle up his throat, after the fashion, and thread cambric ruffles rushing out of his yellow-satin waistcoat. Sylvia had resisted her mother's entreaties to wear a sash, to wear another necklace, to wear a wreath of artificial flowers, and various other adornments, and by the charming simplicity of her dress was even more successful than usual in persuading the world that she was handsome.

At Deerchase, the house was lighted with wax candles as soon as it was dark. The grounds were illuminated with Chinese lanterns, a luxury never before witnessed in those parts; there was to be a constant exhibition of fireworks on the river, and a band of musicians played in the grounds, and another band in the great hall, which was cleared for dancing. A ball upon a plantation was always as much enjoyed by the negroes as the white people, and every negro at Deerchase was out in his or her Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes, some to help in the house, some at the stables to take care of the carriages and horses, and others who merely enjoyed looking on with intense though regulated delight. Bob Skinny was simply immense, and fairly outshone Mrs. Shapleigh in the number and variety of his rings, chains, and breastpins. He stood on the square portico that faced the drive, with his arms magnificently folded, his "fluke" under his arm, and occasionally, with an air of tremendous solemnity, he consulted a huge silver watch which didn't run, that Skelton had given him. Bob arrogated to himself the honour of receiving the guests as they alighted, while Skelton occupied a comparatively unimportant position in the hall. Bulstrode was prowling about, completely subdued by his evening coat and a pair of large white kid gloves. Lewis Pryor, full of delighted excitement, was surveying his handsome boyish figure in the glass over the hall chimney-piece, as Skelton descended the stairs, putting on his gloves.

"How do you like yourself?" he called out.

Lewis blushed furiously and laughed.

Meanwhile Bob Skinny and the "hade man" of the musicians were having a lively verbal scrimmage in the porch.

"Here you is!" remarked Bob, with an air of lofty patronage, as the leader of the band, a red-faced German, accompanied by his satellites, appeared on the porch with their instruments. "Now, I gwi' show you how ter play de fluke, an' I gwi' play wid you, arter I done git th'u wid receivin' de cump'ny. I kin play de fluke better'n anybody you ever see, but I ain' proud; I doan' min' playin' wid you."

"You holt your tongue," calmly remarked the German. "I got no dime der drifle."

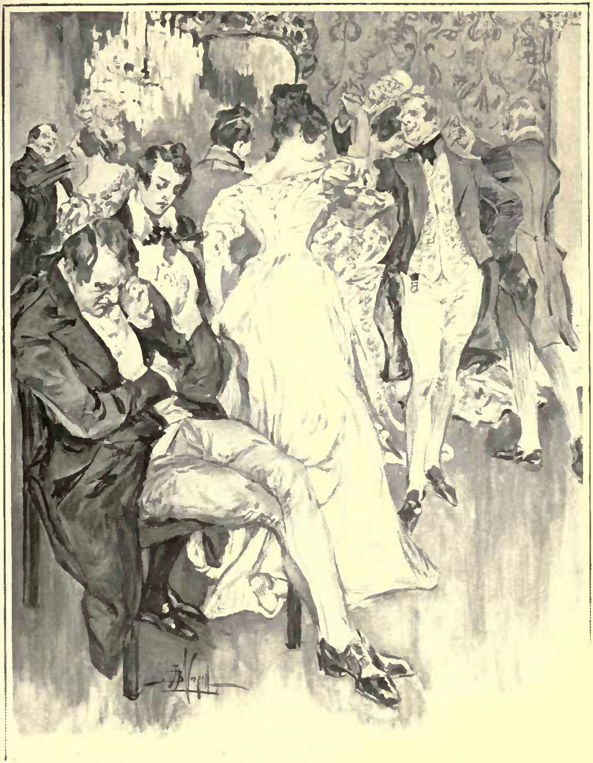
"Look a-here," answered Bob Skinny severely, "doan' you go fer to wex me; doan' you wex nor aggrawate me. I done been ter Germany, and 'tain't nobody d'yar 'cept po' white trash. *You's* de hade man o' dem fiddlers, an' *I* is de hade man o' Mr. Richard Skelton, dat's got mo' lan' an' niggers en all de wuffless Germans put toge'rr." Bob's remarks were cut short untimely by Skelton's appearing in the porch, when he became as mute as an oyster. Meanwhile the musicians had carried their instruments in, and began tuning up. Bob, however, could not refrain from tuning and blowing on his "fluke" at the most critical time, when his enemy, the German, was trying to give the pitch.

In a very little while the carriages began rolling up to the door, in the soft purple twilight of July. The Blairs and the Shapleighs were among the first to arrive. Sylvia was really pretty that night, and the excitement of the music and the Chinese lanterns and the fireworks that were being set off upon the river, which was all black and gold with the fire and darkness, was not lost upon her. Never had she seen such a ball; it was worth a dozen trips to the Springs.

Mrs. Blair, too, was in great form, and her turned wedding-gown set so gracefully upon her that she looked to be one of the best-dressed women in the room. Blair put on all his most charming ways, and honey-fuggled Mrs. Shapleigh and several other ladies of her age most audaciously. The women all smiled on him, and Elizabeth suffered the most ridiculous pangs of jealousy that could be imagined. But she was not quite like her old self; the possibilities of the future were always before her; her mind was too often engaged in picturing that dim future when she and Blair and Skelton would be dust and ashes, and her children might be leading a strange, brilliant, dazzling existence, which would be immeasurably removed from any life that she had ever known. And that strong but impalpable estrangement between Blair and herself—she was ashamed and humiliated when she thought of his investigation and prying and peering into Skelton's affairs; and suppose, after all, Skelton should find a way out of it, and then they would get no fortune at all; and what a mortifying position would be theirs! for the whole county must know it—the whole county knew everything.

There was dancing in the main hall and cards in the library, and the lofty and beautiful drawing-rooms were for lookers-on. Skelton, who when he greeted her had pressed Sylvia's hand for the pleasure of seeing the blood mount in her smooth cheek, asked if she was engaged for the first dance.

"Yes," answered Sylvia. "I have been engaged



There was dancing in the main hall, and the drawing-rooms were for lookers-on.—*Page 224*

for it for three weeks—" Skelton scowled; perhaps Sylvia was not as much under his spell as he fancied, but he smiled when Sylvia continued—"to Lewis Pryor."

"The little scamp has circumvented me, I see," he remarked, and did not seem displeased at the idea.

Lewis soon sidled up to Sylvia, proud and delighted at her notice. But it was all the notice he had, except from Mr. Conyers, who patted him on the head, and a smile from Mrs. Blair. The clergyman had come in response to a personal note as well as a card from Skelton, and walked about sadly, thinking on the vast and sorrowful spectacle of human nature even in the presence of so much fleeting joy. He had not been in the house an hour, though, before he came up to say good-night. There was not only much card playing going on in the library, but considerable betting, which was the fashion in those days, and to that Conyers was unalterably opposed.

"Mr. Skelton," said he, coming up to him, "I must say good-night."

"Why so early?" asked Skelton graciously. "Since you have done me the honour of coming, why not do me the pleasure of staying?"

"Because," said Conyers, who spoke the truth in season and out of season, "it is against my conscience to stay where betting is going on. Forgive me, if I apparently commit a breach of hospitality, but consider, Mr. Skelton, you will one day be held accountable for the iniquity that is now taking place under your roof."

"I accept the responsibility," answered Skelton, with unabated politeness, "and I regret your decision. You are always welcome at Deerchase, Mr. Conyers, and you have the most perfect liberty of expressing your opinions."

"Thank you," replied poor Conyers, with tears in his eyes. "If everybody was as tolerant as you, my ministry would be easier than it is."

As Conyers went one way, Skelton went off another, thinking to himself, "Was ever a man so openly defied as I?" True it was he could be openly defied, and everybody had full liberty, until Skelton's own orbit was crossed: then there was no liberty.

Old Tom Shapleigh swung, like a pendulum, between cards and dancing. He danced with all the vigor of colonial days, and his small, high-bred feet, cased in white-silk stockings and low shoes, with silver buckles, twinkled like a ballet dancer's as he cut the pigeon wing. Mrs. Blair, who danced sedately and gracefully, was his partner. Bob Skinny, his head thrown back and wearing an expression of ecstatic delight, watched the dancers from a corner, occasionally waving his "fluke" to mark the time. However, by some occult means he had become acquainted with the champagne punch, and when Skelton's back was turned, Bob proceeded to cut the pigeon wing too, and to back-step and double-shuffle with the most surprising agility. In the midst of this performance, though, a hint of Skelton's approach being given, Bob instantly assumed the most rigid and dignified pose imaginable.

Lewis, after dancing once with Sylvia and once with Mrs. Blair, who spoke to him kindly, wandered about, lonely enough. The people did not relax in the least their aloofness towards him. He felt inexpressibly sad and forlorn, and at this ball, too, which, as a matter of fact, might never have been given but for him. But the beauty and splendour of the scene dazzled him. He could not tear himself away.

Something of the same spell was upon Bulstrode. He knew little and cared less for social life; he was one of those unfortunates who have but one single, solitary source of enjoyment—the purely intellectual; but the lights, the music, the gaiety, the festal air, had its effect even on his sluggish temperament. He sat in a corner of the drawing-room, his bulky, awkward figure filling up a great chair, and Lewis came and leaned silently upon the back of it. In some way, master and pupil felt strange to the rest of the world that night, and drawn together.

"Mr. Bulstrode," said Lewis presently, "I always feel alone in a crowd. Don't you?"

"Yes, boy," answered Bulstrode, glancing about him with an odd look of dejection. "And in a crowd of merry-makers my old heart grows chill with loneliness."

"It is much worse to be lonely when you are young," Lewis moralised. "But there is Miss Sylvia Shapleigh. I wonder if she will come up and talk to us?"

Sylvia did come up and speak to them. There was a new brilliancy in her smile, and a deep and eloquent flush upon her cheek. Bulstrode felt compelled to pay her one of his awkward compliments.

"My dear young lady," he said, "to-night you look like one of those fair Greek girls of old, who lived but to smile and to dance and to love."

Sylvia's colour deepened; she stood quite still, gazing at Bulstrode as if he had uttered a prophecy; but then Lewis, suddenly seeing people going out of the bay windows on the lawn, cried out excitedly: "Now the finest part of the fireworks is going off! Come along" And, seizing her hand, they went out on the smooth-shaven lawn as far as the river.

In spite of the coloured lights, it was dim, as there was no moon. The house, with its great wings, was so illuminated, that it looked enormously large. Afar off came the strains of music, while in the half darkness figures moved about like ghosts. Lewis and Sylvia, standing hand in hand, watched the great golden wheels that rose from a boat in the river magnificently lighting up the blue-black sky, and reflected in the blue-black water as they burst in a shower of sparkles. How good, in those days, were beautiful things to eyes unjaded, to minds prepared to marvel, to tastes so simple that almost anything could inspire wonder and delight!

Sylvia had no wrap around her shoulders, and after a while, as she and Lewis watched the fireworks, she felt a shawl gently placed about her. She realised, without turning her head, that the hand was Skelton's. The rest of the time he stood with them. They were separated from the house by great clumps of crape myrtle, then in its first pink glory. Some invisible bond seemed to unite all three. Skelton felt with the keenest delight the delicious emotions of youth—he was too true a philosopher not to rejoice that he could still feel—and he had always feared and dreaded that chilling of his sensibilities which is the beginning of old age. How bewitching was Sylvia Shapleigh to him then, and if ever they should be married how kind she would be to Lewis! when suddenly came a piercing sense of chagrin and chafing rebellion. He was bound by a chain. All coercion was abnormally hateful to him; and, as Bulstrode had said, the wonder was that he had not gone mad in thinking over how he had been bound by the act of a dead woman.

Sylvia felt instinctively a change in him when he spoke. The fireworks were then over, and they went back to the house, where the dancers' feet still beat monotonously and the music throbbed. They entered through the library windows, and Sylvia admired, as she always did, the noble and imposing array of books.

"Let them alone," said Skelton, with his rare smile that always had something melancholy in it. "See what an old fossil it has made of me!"

Sylvia smiled at him archly, and said: "Yes, an old fossil, indeed! But then, when you have written your great book, you will be among the immortals. You will never grow old or die."

The smile died away quickly from Skelton's face. That book was another bond upon him—that unfulfilled promise to the world to produce something extraordinary. Nobody but Skelton knew the misery that unwritten book had cost him. It had shadowed his whole life.

Lewis Pryor had begun to be sleepy by that time, and after supper had been served he slipped back into the library, to which the card players had not yet returned, and curled up on a leather sofa in the embrasure of a window, where he could see the river and listen to the music. He pulled the damask curtains around him, and lay there in a sort of tranquil, happy dream. How far away was the music, and how odd looked the negroes, peering in at the windows, with their great white eyeballs! and before Lewis knew it he was sound asleep, with only a part of his small, glossy-black head showing beyond the curtain.

Bulstrode, as usual, was attentive to the decanters. He hated cards, and after he had played a few games of loo in the early part of the evening, and had lost some money, he had had enough of it. He wandered aimlessly from one room to another. It was all excessively pretty to him, but childish. His eyes followed Mrs. Blair, and he began to speculate, as he lounged about, his hands in the pockets of his tight black trousers, what would be the result if the Blairs should get all of Skelton's wife's money.

"But I sha'n't be here to see it," he thought rather cheerfully, "for Skelton will outlast this old carcass." Then he began to think, with the sardonic amusement that always inspired him when his mind was on that particular subject, how the bare possibility must infuriate Skelton; and, after all, it would be better to let Lewis alone, and give him Deerchase and all of Skelton's own money—that would be quite as much as would be good for him. On the whole, he was glad he had told Mrs. Blair, and he hoped the dear soul would live to enjoy all that would be hers.

As the night wore on and the fumes of the liquor Bulstrode had drank mounted to his brain, clearing it, as he always protested, the sense of slavery to Skelton vanished. He was a free man; he was not simply an embodied intellect kept by Skelton for his uses, as the feudal barons of old kept the wearers of the motley. Bulstrode began to walk about jovially, to hold up his head, to mend his slouchy gait and careless manners. He strolled up to Mrs. Blair, standing by the library door, with as much of an air as if he owned Deerchase. Skelton, who was not far off, said, smiling, to Sylvia:

"Drink *does* improve Bulstrode. He always declares that it makes a gentleman of him."

It was now getting towards four o'clock, and people with drives of ten and fifteen miles before them began to make the move to go. A few dancers were yet spinning about in the hall. Bulstrode gallantly complimented Mrs. Blair upon her looks, her gown—everything. Elizabeth, with a smile, received his praises. Then, emboldened, he began to be rash, saying:

"And when the time comes, my dear madam, that you are in the commanding place you ought to have—when you are possessed of the power which money gives—when what is Skelton's now shall be yours and your children's—"

"Hush!" cried Mrs. Blair nervously and turning pale. Her eyes sought for Skelton; he was not five feet off, and one look at him showed that he had heard every word, and he was too acute and instant of comprehension not to have taken it in at once. Sylvia Shapleigh had just gone off with her father, and practically Skelton and Mrs. Blair and Bulstrode were alone.

"You think, perhaps," said Bulstrode, laughing wickedly, "that I am afraid Mr. Skelton will hear—" Bulstrode had not seen Skelton, and thought him altogether out of earshot. "But, to use a very trifling standard of value, madam, I don't at this moment care a twopenny damn whether Skelton hears me or not! The money ought to be yours one day, and it will be—" As he spoke, there was Skelton at his elbow.

Skelton's black eyes were simply blazing. He looked ready to fell Bulstrode with one blow of his sinewy arm. His first glance—a fearful one—seemed to sober Bulstrode instantly. The music was still crashing melodiously in the hall; the warm, perfumed air from the long greenhouse with its wide-open doors floated in; the yellow light from a group of wax candles in a sconce fell upon them.

Skelton said not a word as he fixed his eyes wrathfully on Bulstrode, but Bulstrode seemed actually to wither under that look of concentrated rage.

"Skelton," said Bulstrode in an agony, the drops appearing upon his broad forehead, "I have violated no promise." He stopped, feeling the weakness of the subterfuge.

"I would scarcely exact a promise from one so incapable of keeping one," answered Skelton in calm and modulated tones. He had but one wish then, and that was to get Mrs. Blair out of the way that he might work his will on Bulstrode. The restraint of her presence infuriated him, the more when she said, in trembling tones:

"Pray, forgive him; he was imprudent, but the secret is safe with us."

"With us!" Then Blair knew as well.

"I have no secret, Mrs. Blair," answered Skelton with indomitable coolness. "What this—person told you is no secret. As it is very remote, and as there are chances of which Bulstrode himself does not take into account, I thought it useless to inform you. But, if you desire, I will, to-morrow morning, explain the whole thing to you and your husband."

"Pray—pray, do not!" cried Elizabeth.

Skelton bowed, and said: "As you please. But rest assured that, although I never volunteered the information as this man has, yet I stand ready to answer all questions from those who are authorised to ask them."

Bulstrode gazed helplessly from one to the other, strangely overcome. There was something inexpressibly appealing in the look; he feared that he had lost the regard of the only woman who had for him any tenderness of feeling, had revealed a stain upon the boy he loved better than any creature in the world, and had mortally offended the man upon whom he depended for bread.

"Skelton," he cried, almost in tears, "I told her when the ruin that you promised Jack Blair seemed to be accomplished; when she," indicating Mrs. Blair, "was likely to be houseless and homeless; when her only son lay stretched upon his bed more dead than alive; when, I tell you, any man who had not a stone in his bosom for a heart would have felt for her; when I would have laid down my worthless life for her to have brought ease. Can you blame me?"

It was getting to be too much of a scene. Skelton turned towards Bulstrode, who was utterly abject and pitiable. The collapse of any human being is overpowering, but of a man with an intellect like Bulstrode's it became terrible. Mrs. Blair's large and beautiful eyes filled with tears that rolled down her cheeks and upon her bare, white neck. She put her hand on Bulstrode's arm; it was the first kind touch of a woman's hand that he had felt for thirty years.

"It was your kindness, your tenderness for me and mine that made you tell me; and if all the world turns against you, I will not."

Bulstrode raised her hand to his lips and kissed it reverently, and her womanly compassion seemed to awaken some spark of manliness in him. He made no further appeal.

Skelton all this time was cold with rage. He had been in rages with Bulstrode many times, and he had wreaked vengeance on him; he could say words to Bulstrode that would make him wince, but he could not say them before Mrs. Blair. After a moment he bowed low to her again.

"I will not detain you further. Only, pray remember that you are at liberty to take me at my word at any time."

Mrs. Blair paused a moment, and then, recovering herself, replied, with something like haughtiness:

"I have no desire to inquire further; and since this knowledge has certainly not made me any happier, and as I am clear that the affair is in the hands of the law, I have no intention of making it known to anybody whatever." Then she said to Bulstrode: "Good night, my friend."

Skelton accompanied her quite to her carriage. He doubted the capacity of any woman to keep a secret, and he was in that state of furious displeasure and disappointment that the betrayal of what he earnestly desired to keep secret would place any man. But he had an unshakable composure. Mrs. Blair, knowing him as well as she did, could not but admire his coolness under agitating circumstances.

Everybody then was going. Great family carriages were being drawn up before the broad porch. The lights had burned low, and there was a greyness over everything; a cloud of white mists lay over the green fields; the woods were bathed in a ghostly haze; it was the unearthly morning hour which is neither night nor day.

Skelton stood in the middle of the hall telling everybody good-bye, receiving calmly and smilingly congratulations on his charming ball. Sylvia Shapleigh, her eyes languid with excitement and want of sleep, followed in her mother's wake to say good-bye. She knew Skelton's countenance perfectly, and she alone perceived that something strange and displeasing had happened.

At last everybody was gone, even the musicians, the negroes—everybody. Skelton stood in the porch watching the rosy dawn over the delicious landscape, his face sombre, his whole air one of tension. His fury against Bulstrode had partly abated. On the contrary, a feeling of cynical pleasure at the way he would confute him took its place. So, the heedless old vagabond had gone over to Newington with that cock-and-bull story of a fortune whenever he, Skelton, was married or buried; and Mrs. Blair and her husband had been foolish enough to believe him. Well, they would find out their mistake in short order.

Skelton went straight to the library. Bulstrode was still there, sitting in a great chair leaning heavily forward. The daylight had begun to penetrate through the heavy curtains, and the candles were spluttering in their sockets. The first shock over, Bulstrode had got back some of his courage. Skelton, with an inscrutable smile on his face, walked up to him. Never was there a greater contrast between two men—one, a thoroughbred from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, accustomed to the habit of command; the other, bourgeois all over, and only asserting himself by an effort. Bulstrode, meaning to show that he was not cowed, began, like a vulgarian, to be violent.

"Look here, Skelton," he began aggressively, "it's done, and there's no use talking. But recollect that I'm Lewis Pryor's guardian—recollect—I —er—" Here Bulstrode began to flounder.

"I recollect it all," answered Skelton contemptuously; "and I recollect, too, that you are still half drunk. When you are sober—"

"Sober," said poor Bulstrode with something like a groan of despair. "When I'm sober I'm the most miserable, contemptible man on God's earth. When I'm sober you can do anything with me. I'm sober now, I'm afraid."

He was grotesque even in his deepest emotions. Skelton's quick eye had caught sight of Lewis Pryor lying asleep on the sofa. He went towards him and drew back tenderly the curtains that half enveloped him. The boy was sleeping the sleep of youth and health, a slight flush upon his dark cheek, his hair tumbled over his handsome head, one arm thrown off; there was something wonderfully attractive in his boyish beauty.

"Look at him well," said Skelton, with a new, strange pride in his voice. "See how manly, how well formed he is—slight, but a powerful fellow—worth two of that hulking Blair boy. See his forehead; did you ever see a fool with a forehead like that? and the cut of the mouth and chin! Think you, Bulstrode, that with this boy I will ever let the Blairs get any of that money that you foolishly told them they would? Could not any father be proud of such a boy? I tell you there are times when I yearn over him womanishly—when I cannot trust myself near him for fear I will clasp him in my arms. I envy Blair but one thing, and that is, that he can show the fondness for his son that I feel for mine but cannot show. Did you think, did you dream for a moment, that I would not see this boy righted?" He said "this boy" with an accent of such devoted pride that Bulstrode could only gaze astounded, well as he knew Skelton's secret devotion to the boy. He had never in all his life seen Skelton so moved by anything. Skelton bent down and kissed Lewis on the forehead. If the portrait of Skelton's great-grandfather that hung over the mantelpiece had stepped down from its frame and kissed the boy, Bulstrode could scarcely have been more surprised. No mother over her first-born could have shown more fondness than Skelton.

"Go, now," presently cried Skelton. His anger had quite vanished. It seemed as if in that one burst of paternal feeling all pride and anger had melted away. He could defy the Blairs now. Bulstrode might have retaliated on him what he had said to Mrs. Blair about it. He might have said: "How can you prove it? So anxious you were to give this child a respectable parentage, that you cannot now undo, if you will, your own work. And who could not see an object in it that would make people believe you seized upon this boy merely as an instrument against the Blairs?" But he said not a word. He got up and went out, and, as he passed, he laid his hand upon the boy's head.

"I, too, have loved him well," he said.

"Yes," said Skelton, "and that may help you yet. No man that loves that boy can my anger hold against."

And so poor Lewis, who often felt and said sadly that he had no one to love him, was fondled adoringly by the last person in the world that he would have expected.

Skelton shut and locked the library door, and, tenderly placing the boy's head in a more comfortable position, sat down in a great chair and watched him. He could not at that moment bear to have Lewis out of his sight. Yes, the time had now come that he could tell him what had burned within him for so long. The boy was in himself so graceful, so gifted, there was so much to give him, that the foolish world would be compelled to court him and to forget that stain upon him. Skelton said to himself that, had he the choice of every quality a boy should have, he would have chosen just such a mind and character as Lewis had. He was so thoroughly well balanced; he had a fine and vigorous mind, high up in the scale of talent, but far removed from the abnormal quality of genius; there would be for him no stupendous infantile performances to haunt the whole of his future life, no overweighting of any one faculty to the disproportion of the rest. And then, he had an eaglet's spirit. Skelton smiled when he remembered that no human being had ever so stood upon punctilio with him as this little black-eyed boy. He had, too, an exquisite common sense, which enabled him to submit readily to proper authority; he was obedient enough to Bulstrode. And then, he had so much pride that he could never be vain; and he had naturally the most modest and graceful little air in the world. Ah, to think that with such a boy the Blairs should dream that heaven and earth would not be moved to see him righted! And, since the boy was the instrument to defeat the Blairs, there was no reason that Skelton should not follow up that fancy for Sylvia Shapleigh. On the whole, he could part with the money with an excellent grace to Lewis, and he would still be rich, according to the standard of the people about him. Sylvia would forgive Lewis's existence. Skelton was no mean judge of women, and he knew instinctively that Sylvia Shapleigh would be the most forgiving woman in the world for what had happened in the past, and the most unforgiving one of any future disloyalty. He even smiled to himself when he imagined the discomfiture of the Blairs. He would give them no warning; and he felt perfectly certain that Blair would not avail himself of that suggestion made to Mrs. Blair to ride over to Deerchase and see for himself. And then, if Sylvia would marry him, imagine the excitement of the Blairs, the fierce delight, and then the chagrin, the disappointment of finding out that Lewis Pryor was to step in and get all that they had looked upon as theirs. Skelton even began to see that possibly this forcing a decision upon him was not half a bad thing. He had been haunted for some months by Sylvia Shapleigh's wit and charm; her beauty, he rightly thought, was overestimated, but her power to please was not esteemed half enough. He had begun lately for the first time to look forward apprehensively to old age. He sometimes fancied himself sitting alone in his latter days at his solitary hearth, and the thought was hateful to him. He realised well enough that only a woman in a thousand could make him happy, but Sylvia Shapleigh, he began to feel, was the woman. And, considering the extreme affection he felt for Lewis, it was not unlikely—here Skelton laughed to himself—that he was by nature a domestic character. He began to fancy life at Deerchase with Sylvia, and became quite fascinated with the picture drawn by his own imagination. She was a woman well calculated to gratify any man's pride, and deep down in his own heart Skelton knew that was the great thing with him. And she had a heart—in fact, Skelton would have been a little afraid of a creature with so much feeling if she had not had likewise a fine understanding. And if that one boy of his gave him such intense happiness, even with all the wrath and humiliation that had been brought upon him thereby, what could he not feel for other children in whose existence there was no shame? And then, the thought of a lonely and unloved old age became doubly hateful to him. Until lately he had not really been able to persuade himself that he must bear the common fate; that he, Richard Skelton, must some day grow old, infirm, dependent. Seeing, though, that youth had departed in spite of him, he began to fear that old age might, after all, come upon him. But growing old soothed by Sylvia's charming companionship and tender ministrations, and with new ties, new emotions, new pleasures, was not terrifying to him. He revolved these things in his mind, occasionally looking fondly at the sleeping boy, who was indeed all that Skelton said he was. Skelton had no idea of falling asleep, but gradually a delicious languor stole on him. How merrily the blackbirds were singing outside, and the sparrows chirped and chattered under the eaves! Afar off he heard in the stillness of the summer morning the tinkling of the bells as the cows were being driven to the pasture, then all the sweet country sounds melted away into golden silence, and he slept.

CHAPTER XVII.

It was well on towards twelve o'clock before either Skelton or Lewis awaked. The candles had long since burnt out, and the great, square, sombre room was quite dark. Since the early morning the sky had become overcast, and a steady, cold rain was falling outside. The penetrating damp air chilled Skelton to the bone, and he waked with an uncomfortable start. At the very same instant, Lewis, lying on the sofa, also roused, and both pairs of eyes, so strangely alike, were fixed on each other.

Skelton was still under the spell of that burst of parental passion that had overcome him the night before. His sleep had been full of dreams of the boy, and when he waked and saw Lewis's black eyes gazing with sleepy wonder into his own, it seemed the most natural thing in the world.

There was always something compelling in Skelton's glance, but the affectionate expression that gave his eyes a velvety softness, like a woman's, was altogether new to Lewis Pryor. It exercised a certain magnetism over him, and he felt his own gaze fixed on Skelton's by a power he could not understand. He lay there for some minutes under the fascination of Skelton's eyes, with a half-sleepy curiosity; then he rolled off the sofa, and, still obeying a new and strange impulse, went up to him. As Lewis stood looking down upon the man that had never in all those years shown him the slightest mark of personal fondness, some emotion novel and inscrutable and overpoweringly sweet seemed to wake within his boyish heart. He felt instinctively the forging of a new bond, but it was all misty and uncertain to his mind. The waking in the strange room, instead of his own little cosy bedroom, with Bob Skinny shaking him and pleading with him "to git up, fur de Lord's sake, Marse Lewis"—the rising ready dressed, the finding of Skelton looking at him with that expression of passionate tenderness, was like a dream to him. Skelton put out his hand—his impulse was to open his arms and strain the boy to his breast—and said:

"Lewis, have you slept well?"

"Yes, sir," after a pause answered Lewis.

"So have I," said Skelton, "although I did not mean to sleep when I threw myself in this chair. But you should sleep well and peacefully, my boy. Tell me," he continued, holding the boy's hand in his strong yet gentle clasp, "tell me, have I, in all these years that we have lived together, have I ever spoken unkindly to you?"

Lewis thought for a moment gravely, bringing his narrow black brows together.

"No, sir, not that I remember," he replied, after a moment.

"It is not likely that I would," said Skelton in a voice of the most thrilling sweetness, "for you are mine—you are more to me than the whole world. You are my son."

If Skelton expected Lewis to fall upon his neck when these words were uttered, he was cruelly disappointed. The boy drew himself up perfectly rigid. He put up his arm as if to ward off a blow, and turned deathly pale. Skelton, watching him with jealous affection, felt as if a knife had entered his heart when he saw the pallor, the distress, that quickly overcame Lewis. Neither spoke for some moments. Skelton, leaning forwards in his chair, his face pale and set, but his eyes burning, and his heart thumping like a nervous woman's, watched the boy in a sort of agony of affection, waiting for the answering thrill that was to bring Lewis to his arms. But Lewis involuntarily drew farther off. A deep flush succeeded his first paleness; his face worked piteously, and suddenly he burst into a passion of tears.

Skelton fell back in his chair, with something like a groan. He had not meant to tell it in that way; he had been betrayed into it, as it were, by the very tenderness of his love, by the scorn of the idea that anybody should suspect that he would permit the Blairs, or anybody in the world, to profit to Lewis's disadvantage. He had sometimes in bitterness said to himself that love was not meant for him. Whether he loved—as he truly did—in that first early passion for Elizabeth Armistead, he was scorned and cast aside; or whether he was loved with adoring tenderness, as he had been by the woman he married, yet it laid upon him a burden that he had carried angrily and rebelliously for many years. And seeing in Sylvia Shapleigh a woman that in his maturity he could love, there was linked with it either making his enemies rich at his expense, or else proclaiming the stain upon this boy to the world. And he did so love the boy! But after a while his indomitable courage rose. Lewis was excited; he did not fully take in what had been said to him; he could not understand what splendid possibilities were opened to him in those few words, how completely the face of existence was changed for him. Skelton tried to speak, but his voice died in his throat. He made a mighty effort, and it returned to him, but strained and husky.

"Lewis," he said, "what distresses you? When I said that you were mine, I meant that henceforth you should be acknowledged to the world; that you should have from me all the tenderness that has been pent up in my heart for so many years; that you should have a great fortune. If you think I have wronged you, is not this reparation enough?"

"No," said the boy after a while, controlling his sobs; "I know what it means if I am your son, Mr. Skelton. It means that I cannot hold up my head among honourable people again. Nothing can make up to me for that."

Skelton remained silent. An impulse of pride in the boy came to him. Surely, Lewis was bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. No boy of mean extraction could have that lofty sensibility. Lewis, gaining courage, spoke again, this time with dogged obstinacy.

"Mr. Bulstrode always told me that I was the son of Thomas Pryor and Margaret Pryor; and I have my father's books and his picture upstairs—and—and—I believe he *is* my father, Mr. Skelton."

To hear him speak of another man as his father gave Skelton a pang such as he had not felt for many years.

"But," he said gently, "it can be proved; and you must see for yourself, Lewis, how immensely it would be to your worldly advantage."

"It is not to my advantage to know—to feel—that —that—that I am nobody's son; that my mother was— No! no!" he cried, bursting into tears again, "I'll not believe it."

It was plain to Skelton from the boy's manner that the idea was not wholly new to him. After a painful pause Skelton asked quietly:

"Have you ever had a suspicion, a feeling, that you were not what the world believes you to be?"

Lewis would not answer this, and Skelton repeated it. Lewis remained obstinately silent, and that told the whole story.

"And," again asked Skelton, his voice trembling, "have you never felt any of those instinctive emotions, any of that natural feeling towards me, that I felt towards you the first moment I saw you, when you were barely six years old? for I tell you that, had I never seen you until this moment, there is something—there is the strong voice of Nature—that would tell me you were my son."

To this, also, Lewis would make no answer. It had begun to dawn upon his boyish soul that, along with his own keen shame and distress, he was inflicting something infinitely keener and more distressing upon Skelton.

There was a longer pause after this. Lewis ceased his sobbing, and sat, with a white and wretched face, looking down, the image of shame and sorrow. As for Skelton, his heart was torn with a tempest of feeling. Disappointment and remorse and love and longing battled fiercely within him. With all his wealth, with all his power, with all his capacity to charm, he could not bring to him that one childish heart for which he yearned. He was not unprepared for shame and even reproaches on the boy's part, but this stubborn resistance was maddening. A dull-red flush glowed in his dark face. He was not used to asking forgiveness, but if the boy exacted it he would not even withhold that.

"It is hard—it is hard for a father to ask forgiveness of his child, but I ask it of you, Lewis. Your mother granted it me with her dying breath. Will you be more unforgiving than she? Will you deny me the reparation that would have made her happy?"

Lewis raised his black eyes to Skelton's.

"Yes, I forgive you," he said simply; "but, Mr. Skelton, you can't expect me to give up my good name without a struggle for it. Wouldn't you struggle for yours, sir?"

"Yes," answered Skelton, with that glow of pride which he always felt when Lewis showed manliness of feeling.

"Then, sir, you can't complain when I—when Mr. Bulstrode—Mr. Bulstrode is my guardian, sir—"

"But, Lewis," continued Skelton, without the smallest impatience but with a loving insistence, "this is trifling. Why should I open this terrible subject unless everything concerning it were proved—unless it were demanded? Do you think this a sudden madness on my part? It is not. It is, I admit, a sudden determination. I had meant to wait until you were twenty-one—until you were prepared in a measure for it; but circumstances, and the love I bear you, Lewis, have hastened it."

Lewis sat gravely considering.

"Then, Mr. Skelton, let it rest until I am twenty-one. I am only fifteen now—that is," with a burning blush, "Mr. Bulstrode says I am only fifteen, and I am not tall for my age—and I can't—depend upon myself as I ought; and I think it's only fair, sir, to wait until I am a man before forcing this thing on me. But I think it only fair to you, sir," he added after a pause, and rising, "to say that I mean to make the best fight for my good name that I can. It may be as you say; it may be that—that my mother—" here the boy choked. "I can't say it, sir. I don't remember her, but I tell you, Mr. Skelton, if—if—for the sake of all your money I agreed that my mother was—I mean, sir, if any man for the sake of money, or anything else, would dishonour his mother, it would be a villainy. I don't express myself very well, but I know what I mean; and I ask you, sir, would you act differently in my place?"

Lewis had truly said that he was not tall for his age, but as he spoke his slight, boyish figure seemed to rise to man's stature. At first he was hesitating and incoherent in his speech, but before he finished he fixed his eyes on Skelton's so boldly that Skelton almost flinched under the glance. But still there was in his heart that proud instinct of the father which made itself felt, saying:

"This, indeed, is my son—my soul—my own spirit."

Lewis waited, as if for an answer. Skelton, whose patience and mildness had suffered no diminution, answered him gently:

"Our cases are different. You are more unfortunate than I, but one thing I feel deeply: the regard you have for your good name; the reluctance you have to exchange it for any worldly consideration is not lost on me. On the contrary, it makes you still dearer to me. I acknowledge, had you not recognised the point of honour involved, I should have been disappointed. But I am not disappointed in you—I never can be."

Lewis persisted in his question, though.

"But won't you tell me, Mr. Skelton—suppose you had been offered Deerchase, and all your fortune and everything, if you would agree that your mother was—was— I can't say it, sir. *And would you have taken it?*"

The answer was drawn from Skelton against his will; but the boy stood with the courage and persistence of an accusing conscience, asking the question of which the answer seemed so conclusive to his young mind.

"No," at last answered Skelton in a low voice.

"Then, sir," said Lewis eagerly, "do you blame me for acting likewise?"

"But there is no volition in the case," said Skelton. "It is forced upon you, my poor boy. You have no choice."

"At least," said Lewis, after a moment, while his eyes filled with tears, "at least, I will stand up for my mother as long as I can; at least, I will make the best fight for her own good name that I know how. And I tell you, Mr. Skelton, that even—even if I am forced, as you say—to—to—acknowledge it, I'll never profit by it. This I made up my mind to a long time ago—ever since I first began to wonder—"

Skelton knew then that, in the boy's crude, inexperienced way, he had prepared himself to meet the emergency when it came. Lewis turned to go out of the room, but Skelton called him back and silently drew the boy towards him. He passed his hand over Lewis's closely cropped black head and rested it fondly on his shoulder, all the time looking into the boy's eyes with tenderness unspeakable. In that moment a faint stirring of Nature came to Lewis. He began to feel his heart swell towards Skelton with a feeling of oneness. Skelton saw in his troubled, changeful look a new expression. Something like affection quivered in the boy's face. Skelton bent and kissed him softly on the forehead, and Lewis went out silently.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Skelton remained in the library to recover his composure. He sat staring, with unseeing eyes, at the fireplace filled with cedar boughs. Pride and intense affection tugged at his heart. Never, in all his life, had his proud spirit so abased itself as before this boy, whom he loved with the concentrated passion of his whole life. He had not sent him to school from the purest softness of heart, because he was not happy with Lewis out of his sight. He had watched over him silently, and at last the barriers of his pride had been swept away by the torrent of his affection; and with what result? He might indeed feel proud of the tenacity with which Lewis had held on to what he thought was his honour; but had not resentment and hatred been planted in his heart by the revelation made prematurely by Skelton's tenderness? And the idea that the Blairs should ever profit to that boy's disadvantage—the mere thought enraged him. And Lewis was his own son in many particulars. His promise that he would never profit by his own dishonour was no mere boyish threat. Nothing was more likely than that he should hold to it most steadfastly.

After a while Skelton rose and went out into the hall. Under Bridges' masterly management everything had assumed its usual appearance, and, as the day was singularly cold for the season and the downpour incessant, a little sparkling wood fire had been lighted in the broad fireplace. Skelton went up to it and warmed his hands and chilled feet before the cheerful blaze. He was still in his evening dress, and the daylight, dull as it was, showed plainly certain marks of agitation upon his features. He looked every day of his forty years. Bob Skinny came up in a moment to ask if Skelton would have his breakfast then.

"Yes," he answered briefly. "Where is Mr. Lewis Pryor?"

"He gone up sty'ars, sah, tuggin' he dog arter him, an' I heah him lock he do'. I make Sam Trotter k'yar him some breakfas', an' Sam say Marse Lewis hardly corndescen' ter open de do', an' didn' eat nuttin' hardly."

Skelton was troubled at this. It was a sure sign that Lewis was in trouble when he clung desperately to Service, his dog.

Skelton had his breakfast on a little round table in the corner of the hall by the fire, and when it was taken away he sat moodily in the same spot, trifling with a cigar. He had almost forgotten the ball the night before. From where he sat his weary eyes took in all the sad and monotonous landscape—the river, now a sea of grey mist as far as the eye could reach; the sullen lapping of the water upon the sandy stretch of shore, distinctly heard in the profound stillness; and the steady drip, drip, of the rain from the roof, and the tall elms, and the stunted alders by the edge of the water, was inexpressibly cheerless. Even the great hall, as he looked around it, was dreary. There were neither women nor children in that house, and it never had an inhabited look. Over everything was an air of chill and precise elegance that often struck Skelton painfully. His glance swept involuntarily to the portrait of his father, taken when a boy, that so much resembled Lewis; and then, as his eye travelled round upon the pictures of the dead and gone Skeltons, he was solemnly reminded how short had been their lives. They were all young; there was not a grey head in the lot.

Presently he rose and stood before the fire, gazing out of the window with melancholy indifference, and after a while Bulstrode slouched across the farther end of the hall. He did not go near Skelton, who unconsciously grew rigid when he recognised Bulstrode's passing presence. He had not for one instant forgotten Bulstrode's foolish and, to him, exasperating disclosure to Mrs. Blair; but, after all, nothing ever could restrain that reckless tongue. Getting angry over it was the poorest business imaginable.

In a short while Skelton went off to his room. The house, where twelve hours before there had been lights and music, and dancing and feasting, was now as quiet as the grave. The only sound heard was the incessant drip, drip, of the water from the eaves of the house, and from the sodden trees, and from the damp masses of shrubbery, and the moaning of the grey river. Over the whole place, where last night had been a great *fête*, was rain and gloom and sadness; and of the three persons whose splendid home was here, each was alone and wrapped in silent and bitter meditation.

Lewis Pryor spent the whole afternoon, with no company but his dog, in his own room, gazing, just as Skelton was doing at that very moment, with melancholy eyes out upon the watery landscape. How strange it was, thought Lewis, that the river, which made the whole scene so lovely and sparkling on a sunny day, should make it so sad on a dark day! Far down the troubled water, as the mists scurried to and fro, whipped by a sharp east wind, he could occasionally see the three desolate pine trees at Lone Point. They waved their giant arms madly, and fought the wild rain and the blast. The boy's heart sank lower every hour. Yes, it was come—the thing that he had feared for so long with a biting fear. He was told that he was nobody's son; that foolish old Mrs. Shapleigh was right when she said he looked like Skelton's father—like that odious picture in the hall. How he hated it, and how he would like to throw it in the fire! But though his spirits sank, his courage remained high. A fortune was a very fine thing, but there was such a thing as paying too dear for it. The determination not to give in—to make a fight for his own respectability—grew and strengthened hourly within him. He went and got his few books with the name "Thomas Pryor, M. A.," written in them, and names and dates. Then he got out the picture of the trim, sandy-haired Thomas Pryor, and tried vainly to see a likeness between his own clear-cut olive face and the one before him. Alas! there was no likeness. He then studied intently the pen-and-ink sketch of Mrs. Pryor. The coloring, which had really made some resemblance between her and Lewis, was lacking in the picture, and the cast of features was wholly unlike. Lewis got small comfort from that picture. He felt an inexpressible weight upon his boyish soul; he longed for comfort; he thought that he must be the only boy in the world who had never in all his life had any comforter except his dog, or anybody to whom he could confide his troubles. Something brought Hilary Blair to mind, and the scene at the bedside as Hilary held his mother's hand and fondled it; and then Lewis laid his head down in the cushioned window seat and cried bitterly. The twilight came on; he heard the servants moving about below, and presently a tap came at the door. Bob Skinny announced, "Dinnah, my young marse!"

Lewis winced at the word, which, however, was merely a magniloquent African compliment that Bob Skinny offered to all the very young gentlemen he knew.

Lewis and Skelton were remarkably alike in their personal habits. Each of them made a careful toilet and strove to disguise the marks of emotion; they were both naturally reticent and had a delicate and sensitive pride. Lewis took old Service down to dinner with him. Being still low-spirited, he clung to the dog. Skelton noticed this, and it told volumes. Bulstrode had expected, tremblingly, all the afternoon, a summons to Skelton, and, not getting it, was in doubt about appearing at dinner. In truth, Skelton had by no means forgotten him, but he rather scorned to take Bulstrode too seriously. He had smiled rather grimly as he heard Bulstrode during the afternoon make his way down to the library. "Gone to reading to distract his mind," he thought. Just as Lewis showed depression by holding on to Service, Bulstrode showed it by leaving his few old friends that he kept up in his own room, and going down into the grand new library after a mental sedative in the shape of a new book. The effect on this particular occasion had been such that he screwed up his courage to dine with Skelton.

It seemed as if within the last twelve hours a likeness between Skelton and Lewis had come out incalculably strong. Each seemed to take his emotions in the same way: there were the same lines of tension about the mouth, the same look of indomitable courage in the eye, the same modulation in the voice. Bulstrode could not but be struck by it. Dinner passed off quite as usual. Skelton made a few remarks to Lewis, which Lewis answered respectfully and intelligently, as usual. Bulstrode occasionally growled out a sentence. Bob Skinny, elated by the approaching departure of the hated Bridges, flourished the decanters about freely, but for once Bulstrode was moderate. To judge by casual appearances, nothing had happened. After dinner, Lewis disappeared into the library, still lugging his dog after him. Skelton, whose heart yearned over him, would have liked to follow him, but he wisely refrained.

The little fire had been renewed, and a pleasant warmth was diffused through the lofty hall. Sam Trotter, under Bob Skinny's direction, brought candles, in tall silver candlesticks, and put them on the round mahogany table in the corner by the chimney-piece. Bulstrode was lumbering about the hall with his hands in his pockets. Skelton walked up to the fireplace and seated himself, with a cigar and a book, as if unconscious of Bulstrode's presence. By degrees, Bulstrode's walk grew stealthy; then he seated himself on the opposite side of the hearth and gazed absently into the fire.

The same stillness prevailed as in the afternoon. This struck Skelton more unpleasantly than usual. He would have liked to see Lewis romping about, and making cheerful, merry, boyish noises. But there was no sound except the dreary sough of the rain and the wind, and the harsh beating of the overhanging trees against the cornice of the house. The wind seemed to be coming up stronger from the bay, and the waves rolling in sometimes drowned the falling of the rain. For two hours the stillness was unbroken. Then, Skelton having laid down his book for a moment, Bulstrode asked suddenly:

"And how did he take it?"

Skelton knew perfectly well what Bulstrode meant, and, not being a person of subterfuges, answered exactly to the point:

"Like a man."

"I thought so," remarked Bulstrode. If he had studied ten years how to placate Skelton he could not have hit it off more aptly.

"He grasped the point of honour in a moment—even quicker than I anticipated. He said he would rather be respectably born than have all I could give him. The little rebel actually proposed to fight it out; he 'hoped I would wait until he was twenty-one; he 'wouldn't profit by it anyhow!' and he 'intended to make the best fight he could.' Bulstrode, I almost forgive you for having forced that disclosure on me when I remember the exquisite satisfaction—yes, good God! the *tremendous* satisfaction—I felt in that boy when I saw that dogged determination of his to hold to what he calls his honour."

Bulstrode knew by these words that Skelton did not intend to turn him out of doors.

"You ought to have seen his face the day that dratted Mrs. Shapleigh told him that he looked like that picture." Bulstrode jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards the picture of Skelton's father. "I thought he would have died of shame."

Skelton's face at this became sad, but it was also wonderfully tender. Bulstrode kept on:

"I never saw you both so much alike as to-night. The boy's face has hardened; he is going through with a terrible experience, and he will come out of it a man, not a boy. And your face, Skelton, seemed to be softening."

"And, by heaven, my heart is softening, too!" cried Skelton. "One would have thought that I would have kicked you out of doors for babbling my private affairs, but your love for that boy, and his love for you—and so— I am a weak fool, and forgive you. I believe I am waking up to the emotional side of human nature."

"It's a monstrous sight deeper and bigger and greater than the intellectual side," answered Bulstrode. "That's what I keep telling that poor devil, Conyers. I ain't got any emotional nature myself, to speak of; you have, though. But you've been an intellectual toper for so long, that I daresay you'd forgotten all about your emotions yourself. Some men like horse racing, and some like to accumulate money, and some like to squander it; but your dissipation is in mental processes of all sorts. You like to read for reading's sake, and write for writing's sake, and your mind has got to that stage, like Michael Scott's devil, it has got to be employed or it will rend you. I never saw such an inveterate appetite for ideas as you have. But will it ever come to anything? Will you ever write that book?"

Skelton turned a little pale. The fierce ambition within him, the pride, the licensed egotism, all made him fear defeat; and suppose this work— But why call it a work? it was as yet inchoate. However, it pleased some subtile self-love of Skelton's to have Bulstrode discuss him. Bulstrode was no respecter of persons; and Skelton appreciated so much the man's intellectual makeup, that it pleased him to think that Bulstrode, after living with him all these years, still found him an object of deep and abiding interest. So he did not check him. Few men object to having others talk about themselves.

"Whether I shall ever live to finish it—or to begin it—is a question I sometimes ask myself," said Skelton. "When I look around at these," pointing with his cigar to the portraits hanging on the wall, "I feel the futility of it. Forty-six is the oldest of them; most of them went off before thirty-five. Strange, for we are not physically bad specimens."

They were not. Skelton himself looked like a man destined for long life. He was abstemious in every way, and singularly correct in his habits.

Bulstrode remained huddled in his chair, and, as usual, when encouraged, went on talking without the slightest reticence.

"Sometimes, when I sit and look at you, I ask myself, 'Is he a genius after all?' and then I go and read that essay of yours, Voices of the People, and shoot me if I believe any young fellow of twenty that ever lived could do any better! But that very finish and completeness—it would have been better if it had been crude."

"It is crude, very crude," answered Skelton with fierce energy, dashing his cigar stump into the fire. "I have things on my library table that would make that appear ridiculous."

"O Lord, no!" replied Bulstrode calmly.

Skelton felt like throwing him out of the window at that, but Bulstrode was quite unconscious of giving offense. His next words, though, partly soothed Skelton's self-love:

"Queer thing, that, how a man's lucky strokes sometimes are his destruction. Now, that pamphlet—most unfortunate thing that ever befell you. The next worst thing for you was that you were born to one fortune and married another. Had you been a poor man your career would have been great; but, as it is, handicapped at every step by money, you can do nothing. For a man of parts to be thrown upon his own resources is to be cast into the very lap of Fortune, as old Ben Franklin puts it. But your resources have never been tested."

There was in this an exquisite and subtile flattery to Skelton, because Bulstrode was so unconscious of it.

"How about yourself?" asked Skelton after a while. "You were cast in the lap of Fortune."

"O Lord!" cried Bulstrode, "that's a horse of another colour. I came into the world with a parching thirst that can never be satiated. But, mind you, Mr. Skelton, had I not been a poor man I could not have been what I am; you know what that is. I can't make a living, but *I know Greek.* I can't keep away from the brandy bottle, but if old Homer and our friend Horace and a few other eminent Greeks and Romans were destroyed this minute I could reproduce much of them. It maddens me sometimes; the possession of great powers is, after all, a terrible gift. Lewis Pryor has got it, but he has got it tempered with good sense. For God's sake, Skelton, don't make him a rich man! Look at yourself, ruined by it. The boy has fine parts. Some day, if he is let alone and allowed to work for his living, he will be remarkable; he will be more—he will be admirable! But weight him down with a fortune, and you will turn him into a country squire like Jack Blair, or into a *dilettante* like yourself. That's all of it."

Skelton lighted his cigar and began to smoke savagely. Was ever anything like the perversity of fate—for he recognised as true every word that Bulstrode had uttered. Because he had much money he had started out to make Blair feel the weight of his resentment, and he had spent fifteen or sixteen years at the business, and the result was that Blair was to-day better off than he had ever been since he came to man's estate, as he was free at last from a vice that had been eating him up body and soul and substance for years. Skelton longed to heap benefits on Lewis Pryor, but he very much doubted if any of those things which he designed as benefits would make the boy either happier or better.

Bulstrode's tongue continued to wag industriously. It seemed as if by some psychic influence he followed the very train of thought then going through Skelton's mind.

"The women all like Lewis. I tell you, that's a very dangerous gift for a man—worse, even, than genius."

Skelton quite agreed with this sentiment. If the late Mrs. Skelton had not been so distractedly fond of him, for example, and had simply done for him what any reasonably affectionate wife would have done for her husband, he would not now be in the hateful position in which he found himself. Her relations would be welcome to her money, but she had put it quite out of the question that it should ever be theirs.

"Women are monstrous queer creatures, anyhow," resumed Bulstrode despondingly, as if his whole past and future hinged upon the queerness of women.

Skelton could not forbear smiling a little. Bulstrode had suffered about as little from the sex as any man that ever lived.

"Woman, as we know her, is a comparatively modern invention," answered Skelton, still smiling. "She didn't exist until a few hundred years ago."

"That's it," answered Bulstrode eagerly. "It's the only fault I find with my old chums, the classics; they didn't have any right notions at all about women; they didn't know anything between a goddess and a slave. But these modern fellows, with Will Shakespeare at the head of the crew, know it all, blamed if they don't! There is that little Juliet, for example—all love and lies, and the sweetest little creetur in the world! Now, what did any of those old Greek fellows know about such a woman? And it's a common enough type. For my part, I'm mortally afraid of the whole sex—afraid of the good because they are so good, and afraid of the bad because they are so deuced bad. And as for their conversation, it's a revelation, from that damned Mrs. Shapleigh up."

Skelton could not keep from laughing at the mere mention of Mrs. Shapleigh's name, although he was in no laughing mood.

"Shoot me," cried Bulstrode with energy, "if that woman isn't a walking *non sequitur!*"

To this Skelton only answered: "Every human being has a natural and unalienable right to make a fool of himself or herself. But Mrs. Shapleigh abuses the privilege."

"Drat her," was Bulstrode's only comment.

"How do you account for Miss Shapleigh's wit and charming *esprit?*" asked Skelton, with some appearance of interest.

"Because she's Mrs. Shapleigh's daughter: everything goes according to the rule of contrary in this world. I like to hear that grey-eyed Sylvia talk; there's nothing like it in the books, it is so sparkling, inconsequent, and delightful. And she's got something mightily like an intellect. Mind, I don't admit that women have minds in the sense of abstract intellect, but I say she has got such a vast fund of perceptions mixed up with her emotions, that it's twice as useful as your mind, or mine either. Her education, too, is better than mine, for it's all experience, while I am nothing but a sack full of other folks' ideas."

After this Bulstrode stopped, and presently slouched off to bed. He was surprised that Skelton had forgiven him so easily, or rather had been so indifferent to his offense, but Skelton had a good many reasons for not falling out with him then and there.

After that things went on very quietly for a time. Skelton did not even mention the subject that he had talked to Lewis about the morning after the ball, and Lewis went about, serious and sad, with a weight upon his heart. The likeness between the two came out stronger every day. Just as Lewis suddenly seemed to become a man and his face lost its boyish character, so Skelton's face grew younger and gentler by reason of the upspringing of a host of strange feelings. It seems as if the opening of his heart to Lewis had made a new man of him. He sometimes thought to himself: "What wonderful vitality have these old emotions, after all! It seems impossible either to starve them or strangle them."

Sylvia Shapleigh appeared to him more and more captivating, and he realised after a while that he was as much in love with her as he could be with any woman. But a great many things would have to be settled before he could speak to Sylvia. He reflected that no man could guarantee to himself one single day of life, and, on the whole, it was better to have matters arranged in his lifetime. Then it occurred to him for the first time that if he could satisfy the Blairs that Lewis put an embargo upon their supposititious claims, there would be no occasion for making it public. Of course, it would have to be known to a certain number of persons, but they were chiefly legal people in England, and England was in those days almost as far off as another planet. And it must come out at his death, but that might be many years off, and Lewis might have married into a good family, and the gossip might have become an old story, and everything much better than springing it suddenly on the community then. Skelton went quietly to work, though, and accumulated the proofs of Lewis's parentage, and found them much more conclusive than Bulstrode had thought them to be. He was meanwhile gradually making up his mind to ask Sylvia Shapleigh to marry him. Of course he must tell her all about Lewis, but he thought it likely that she knew as much as he could tell her, and if she really cared for him she would be good to the boy for his sake—to say nothing of Lewis's sake, for he was undoubtedly lovable. It was very unfortunate; he did not know of any man who had a complication so painful; but still there were ways out of it. One thing was certain: no one would ever trouble him with remarks on the subject, or Sylvia either, if they should be married. People might think as they pleased, but he and Sylvia and Lewis could afford to ignore gossip and idle tittle-tattle.

Lewis, although obviously depressed, took a suddenly industrious turn about his lessons. He began to study so hard, that Bulstrode was amazed and delighted.

"Why," he cried one day, "you are learning so fast that you'll soon be as big a knowledge box as the British Museum."

"I think I'd better work hard, sir, because some day I shall probably have to earn my living," answered Lewis quite gravely.

"Pooh!" said Bulstrode, "you'll have the greatest fortune that ever was."

Lewis turned perfectly crimson, and said nothing. Presently Bulstrode continued:

"It seems to me, youngster, that you have been going through with a change lately."

"I have, sir," answered Lewis in a low voice. "Mr. Skelton tells me that if I will acknowledge that—that—I am not Thomas Pryor's son he will give me a fortune."

"Showed you all the kingdoms of the earth to tempt you, eh?"

"Yes, sir, something like it."

"And you don't want 'em?"

"Not at the price I have to pay for them, sir."

"But I don't believe Skelton can help himself, or you either, from your having that fortune. I think he wants to marry Miss Sylvia Shapleigh; and if he dies, or marries, his wife's money either goes to you or to the Blairs; and I believe the poor dead woman would turn over in her grave if she thought anybody that Skelton hates like the Blairs would get it."

"But wouldn't she hate for me to get it?" asked Lewis.

"Well"—here Bulstrode began to rub his shaggy head—"not so much as the Blairs. You see, you are innocent yourself; nobody would feel any grudge against you; it all happened before Skelton married her; and Mrs. Skelton was so desperately fond of Skelton, that she would be very likely to be tolerant towards any innocent creature that he loved. Queer subjects women are."

"If Mr. Skelton thinks I am going to give up without a fight, he's very much mistaken!" cried Lewis suddenly.

Bulstrode clapped him on the back and roared out, "Good for you, boy!"

Some days after that Skelton sent for Lewis into the library. Lewis went with a beating heart. There had not been the slightest change in their relations since that morning in the library, but it had been wholly Lewis's own doing. He maintained a reserve towards Skelton that was unbroken. Much as he loved the boy, Skelton could not bring himself to become a supplicant, as it were, for his affections; and so, although each watched the other, and they lived under the same roof, there was a grim reserve between them.

When he reached the library, Skelton had before him a sheet of paper with a translation on it.

"Bulstrode tells me," said Skelton, pointing to a chair for Lewis to sit down, "that you did this out of Horace without any assistance. It isn't perfect, of course—nobody translates old Horace perfectly—but it is extraordinarily good for a fellow of your age. And Bulstrode also gives most gratifying reports of your progress in all your studies."

Lewis's heart beat faster still. Here was a chance to let Skelton know that he had not in the least wavered from his determination not to take the money in exchange for his name.

"I—I—feel that I ought to study very hard, so that I can—some day—when I'm a man—make my own living, sir," he said, blushing very much.

"Ah!" replied Skelton, with an air of calm inquiry.

"Yes, sir," responded Lewis, plucking up his courage a little.

Skelton looked him squarely in the eyes, as he had done very often of late, and was met by a dauntless look. Ah, where was there another fifteen-year-old boy who showed such a nice sense of honour, such heroic firmness in withstanding temptation? He expressed something of this in his words, at which the boy's face hardened, and his heart hardened too.

"I only ask, sir," he said, "that I shall be let alone until I am twenty-one. When I am a man I shall know how to stand upon my rights."

"I think, Lewis," said Skelton calmly, "that your reason is already convinced. You no longer believe yourself to be the son of Thomas Pryor, yet you talk about making a fight for it."

Lewis made no reply. He was no match for Skelton, and he knew it; but his determination was perfectly unchanged.

"Listen to me," began Skelton after a moment, leaning forward in his chair; "you are rather an uncommon boy." Skelton, as he said this, smiled slightly, remembering that Lewis could scarcely fail to be unlike most boys. "I shall talk to you as if you were a man, instead of a boy, and perhaps you will understand why it is that I intend to do you right in the face of the world."

"To do me wrong," said Lewis under his breath.

Skelton pretended not to hear. He then carefully and in detail went over the whole thing with Lewis, who happened to know all about it through Bulstrode. The only answer Skelton got out of the boy was a dogged

"I don't want it at the price I have to pay for it. You wouldn't want to exchange your respectability for anything."

"But have I no claim upon you, Lewis?" asked Skelton. His tone was hard to resist. It conveyed an appeal as well as a right; but Lewis resisted.

"I don't know," he said in a distressed voice; "all I know is that I believe that I am Lewis Pryor, and I want to stay Lewis Pryor; and if—if—you do as you say, you may make me a rich man some day, but you make me the inferior of everybody. I know it; I've talked it out with Mr. Bulstrode."

"And what did Bulstrode say?" asked Skelton, his face darkening. But Lewis was wary beyond his years.

"I'd rather not tell, sir; Mr. Bulstrode wouldn't like it."

"I'm sure he wouldn't like it," answered Skelton sardonically, "the ungrateful old good-for-nothing! But I can guess easily enough what he has been up to."

Lewis felt that he was playing a losing game, but he only repeated:

"The Blairs will get that money."

Skelton had all along spoken in a quiet, conventional tone, but at this he uttered a slight exclamation, and ground his teeth with silent fury. The boy's obstinacy was intolerable to a man accustomed to make his will the law. Of course, he could do as he pleased about it; he could prove the whole thing to-morrow morning, if he liked, but he did not want to be opposed by the person he wished to benefit; and besides, he loved the boy well, and contradiction from him was therefore doubly hard.

Lewis got up to go out. As he passed, rather a grim smile came into Skelton's face. He saw his own look of firm determination upon the boy's thin-lipped, eloquent mouth, and in his dark eyes. Lewis was growing more like him every day. Poor little fool! Talk about proving himself to be the son of that lanky, loose-jointed Thomas Pryor! It was ridiculous.

CHAPTER XIX.

Skelton had cold fits and hot fits as regarded Sylvia. At first he considered his cold fit as his abnormal condition, and the hot fit as an agreeable form of insanity. But he soon changed his opinion. He was beginning, late in life, to live through what other men are generally done with by that time. In Sylvia's society he felt always an exquisite sense of well-being that he could not remember ever to have felt before with any human being except in a certain way with Lewis. When the boy had been younger Skelton recalled, that to watch him at play, or at his work, had always given him strange delight—a delight unique of its kind, and more nearly resembling happiness than anything he had ever known. But looking back calmly upon his life, he could not remember that he had ever known apart from Sylvia and Lewis that joyous sense of existence which is happiness. He remembered that in his early days he had felt a sense of triumph when the public—his public—caught at the idea of his future greatness. He knew well enough a certain refined and elevated pleasure in purely intellectual pursuits. But happiness is the child of the affections, and Skelton's affections had fared rather badly. He recollected his early passion for Elizabeth Armistead with hatred. She had given him fierce joys and sharp pain, but that was far removed from happiness. His marriage had been from a curious mixture of motives, and he dared not admit to himself how little love had had to do with it; he had felt tenderness and extreme gratitude to his wife, but happiness had still eluded him. Now, however, he realised with keen pleasure that, after all, he was not done with life and youth—he had not yet come down to the dregs and heel taps of existence. He had sounded all the depths and shoals of a life of pleasure and of a life of intellect, and he was tired of both. True it was, that books still had a fatal fascination for him; that passion for reading and for making his mind drunk at the fountain of other men's knowledge was ineradicable. But he had at last come to crave something else. Like all men who lead a one-sided life with a two-sided nature, he was seized with a profound disgust, and would have welcomed almost any change. Never had he understood the futility of a normal human being trying to live on ideas alone until he returned to Deerchase. As soon as he had eliminated everything from his life except books and intellectual effort, he began to find books more of an anodyne and work more of a hopeless effort than ever. When he was quite ready for his life work, when he had prepared himself, his house, his tools, in perfection for that work, a deadly paralysis had seized upon him, a frightful fear of failure. Then, following this, he suddenly found an unsuspected source of pleasure—the society of a woman. He could have as much or as little of that society as he wanted, even if he married her, for it is the privilege of the rich to have privacy and independence in every relation of life. It was true he would have to give up much money, which most men are unequal to parting with, to marry her. But he would give it up to Lewis, a creature intensely loved. Still, it would be a curtailment of his power, for money is power.

At first the consequences seemed enormous; but they assumed much smaller proportions as he investigated them. He would not be able to buy thousands of books, as he had done, but he suspected, with a kind of shame, that he had too many books already. He would no longer be able to leave orders in blank with the great collectors in London, and Paris, and Rome to buy him rare editions, but he remembered with disgust that these orders had been carried out rather with a view of getting his money than to increasing the value of his collection. He had caught two of his agents in the act of palming off spurious volumes upon him, and had informed them of his discovery and had given them no more orders. As for buying pictures and bric-a-brac, that taste was not then developed in this country. Hundreds of ways of spending money, well known in the latter half of the nineteenth century, were quite unknown in the first half. Skelton found that in giving up his wife's fortune he was giving up much in the abstract and but little in the concrete. And then came his interview with Lewis.

The boy's unhappy face, though, haunted him. Skelton had not once seen him smile since that night of the ball. He went about solemnly, his black eyes, that were usually full of light, sombre and distressed, and Service was never allowed out of his sight. He kept closely to Deerchase, and did not even go to Belfield until Sylvia wrote him a note gently chiding him. As for Sylvia, whatever she felt for Skelton, she had adopted the general belief that he would never marry at all. She felt a kind of resentment towards him, for, after comparing him with the other men she knew, she acknowledged promptly to herself that she could never marry any of those other men. Skelton had done her that ill turn; he had shown her so conclusively the charm of a man with every advantage of birth, breeding, intellect, knowledge of the world, and, above all, his subtile personal charm, that other men wearied her. Even Blair, who found women usually responsive to him, discovered that Sylvia was rather bored with him. She had tasted of the tree of knowledge, and was neither better nor happier for it. She was acute enough to see that her society gave Skelton more pleasure than any other woman's, but then that was easily understood. Provincials are generally uninterestingly alike. Sylvia Shapleigh happened to be a little different from the rest. In her own family she was singularly lonely. Her father was the conventional good father, and both of her parents were proud of her. But she was a being different from any in their experience. Old Tom Shapleigh boasted of her spirit, and said he believed Sylvia was waiting to marry the President of the United States; but he was vexed that she was getting out of her twenties so fast without making a good match, and every offer she had always provoked a quarrel between father and daughter. Mrs. Shapleigh considered that Sylvia's obstinacy in that respect was expressly meant as a defiance of maternal authority, and continually reproached her that she would yet bring her mother's grey hairs with sorrow to the grave because she wouldn't accept any offer made to her.

Lewis Pryor was not more lonely than Sylvia Shapleigh, although, womanlike, she showed more fortitude and was more uncomplaining about it. But on account of that solitariness common to both of them, the imaginative woman and the half-developed boy had a sympathy for each other—an odd, sweet community of thought. Sylvia had heard all the talk floating about the county regarding Lewis Pryor, and had observed the coldness with which the world, which smiled so benignly on Skelton, frowned on the innocent boy; but, more just as well as more generous than the sodden world, his misfortune was only another reason why she should be kind to him.

The summer passed slowly to most of them: to Blair, impatiently awaiting news from England; to his wife, vexed with him for his action; to Sylvia, who began to feel a painful sense of disappointment and narrowness and emptiness in existence; to Lewis, prematurely burdened with the problems of life; to all, except Skelton. Indeed, time had a way of flying frightfully fast with him, and he barely recovered the shock and surprise of one birthday before another was precipitated on him. And yet he was going about that book as if the ages were his! He had quite given up his racing affairs to Miles Lightfoot, and was apparently devoting himself to some abstruse studies in his library. So he was—but Sylvia Shapleigh was the subject.

Although a very arrogant and confident man, Skelton was too clear-headed not to consider the possibility that Sylvia might not marry him, but it was always difficult for him to comprehend that he could not have his own way about anything he desired.

He meant, however, to be very prudent. He would bring all of his finesse and worldly wisdom to bear, and he would not be outwitted by any woman. So thought Samson of old.

Skelton did not go to Belfield very often, but in one way and another he saw Sylvia pretty constantly. He never could quite make out the faint resentment in her manner to him. But the truth, from Sylvia's point of view, was, that he had come into her life and disorganised it, and made her dissatisfied with what before had satisfied her, and had shown her other ideals and standards which were beyond her reach; and, on the whole, Sylvia reckoned Skelton among the enemies of her peace.

In August, Mrs. Shapleigh usually made her hegira to the Springs. One of Sylvia's crimes in her mother's eyes was that she was not always madly anxious to be off on this annual jaunt. But this year nobody could complain that Sylvia was not ready enough to go. So eager was she for a change, that Mrs. Shapleigh declared Sylvia would go off without a rag to her back if it were not for a mother's devotion. Lewis Pryor dreaded her going, and he seemed really the only person whom Sylvia regretted. But Skelton found himself secretly very much dissatisfied with the idea that Sylvia should go away.

One hot August afternoon, after having seen the great Belfield carriage drive out of the lane with Mr. and Mrs. Shapleigh, and seeing Sylvia's white figure fluttering about on the river shore, Skelton concluded that he would walk across the bridge and call on Mr. and Mrs. Shapleigh, which would result, of course, in his seeing only Sylvia.

The day had been sultry, and not a breath stirred the giant trees around Deerchase. There were masses of coppery clouds in the west, and, although the sun blazed redly, the river was dark. Skelton predicted a thunderstorm as he crossed the bridge.

Down by the water was Sylvia, with a rustic hat tied under her chin.

"I am going all over the place for the last time," she said to Skelton when he came up. "Day after to-morrow we start—we can't make the journey in less than eight days—and oh, I shall be so glad to be on the road!"

It rather disconcerted Skelton that Sylvia, who seemed so different from most women, should be so anxious after what seemed to him a commonplace pleasure. He hated watering places himself.

"It will be very gay, no doubt," he answered. "But it is such an immense effort for so little!"

"Yes," agreed Sylvia, walking slowly along the edge of the river and looking absently down towards Lone Point; "but there is a dreadful stagnation here. I wake up every morning at the same moment—to see the same things—to meet the same people. Ah, how tired I am of it all!"

This was a rare complaint for women to make in those days, when a taste for travelling was thought depraved. Skelton observed her closely, and saw signs of an inward restlessness.

"And will you be satisfied at the Springs?" he asked, smiling.

"Of course not," answered Sylvia airily. "I shall be no better satisfied than at Belfield; but it will be a change. Ah, Mr. Skelton, you don't know what it is to be caged!"

Skelton thought he understood her.

"Some day you will see the world," he said, "and then you will lose all of your illusions. I am satisfied at Deerchase, because I know it is as good a spot as any in the world."

"Do you think I will ever see the world?" said Sylvia. "Well, I don't think I will. I want it too much. We never get what we want very, very much."

"Yes, we do," replied Skelton, looking skyward. "We want rain very, very much, and we will get it very soon."

"If you are afraid of being soaked," said Sylvia, with a kind of soft insolence, "you had better go home."

Skelton perceived that she was trying to vex him. "No, I sha'n't go home yet a while; and if a storm comes up, I shall stay with you, as I know your father and mother are away. I saw the carriage drive out of the lane before I started."

"Yet you asked very politely if papa and mamma were at home?"

"Certainly I did. Politeness is a necessity when one is carrying out a deception."

Sylvia turned a rosy colour, more with anger than with pleasure. Skelton was amusing himself at her expense. Latterly he had fallen into a half-bantering love-making with her that was infuriating. Sylvia shut her lips, threw back her head, and unconsciously quickened her walk. Skelton, without making the slightest attempt at conversation, walked by her side. They were following the indentations of the river towards the bridge. The sky lowered, and presently a few large drops of rain fell. Sylvia started and turned a little pale. She was afraid of storms, and already the rumbling of thunder was heard.

"I must fly home!" she cried. "Good-bye," and gave him her hand.

At that moment the air suddenly turned black, and there was a blinding flash of light, a sudden roar of thunder, and all at once a great golden willow not fifty yards from where they stood seemed to shrivel before their eyes as a bolt struck it. A fearful stillness hung over the land, although the thunder bellowed overhead. Sylvia trembled, and clung to Skelton's sinewy brown hand.

"Don't go!" she said piteously.

In another instant she felt herself rushed along towards the house. She was breathless, and the wind, which had suddenly risen, blew the brim of her large hat over her eyes, but just as the rain swept down in a torrent she found herself in the Belfield hall, panting and frightened, but safe.

"Now," said Skelton coldly and with malicious satisfaction, "good-bye."

"What do you mean?" cried Sylvia, aghast. "In this rain?"

"The rain is nothing," replied Skelton, buttoning up his coat. He was vexed with her, and was sincere in meaning to go home.

"But—but—you *mustn't* go," said Sylvia, looking at him with terrified eyes.

"Are you afraid to be alone? I will call the servants for you."

"Yes, I am afraid," cried Sylvia desperately; "I am afraid for you." She paused suddenly. In her nervousness and tremor and agitation she scarcely knew what she was saying; the roar of the rattling thunder almost drowned her voice; it died in her throat, and her heart fluttered wildly as Skelton suddenly seized her hand.

"Are you afraid for me, dear Sylvia?" he asked.

Something compelling in Skelton's gaze forced Sylvia to raise her eyes to his, which were blacker, more lustrous, than she had ever seen them. She made no answer, but her own eyes shone with a deep, green light that was enchanting. All at once the whole world outside of Skelton seemed to slip out of sight. But Skelton felt the most delicious ease and sense of reality. That one glance revealed her whole soul to him. Here was one creature who could love him; here was that soft, human fondness of which he had known but little in his life; and he knew well enough that way lay happiness. He cast prudence and forethought and finesse to the winds. The inevitable hour had come to him as to other men. He drew her close to him, and took the great wet hat off her head and kissed her passionately a dozen times, saying some incoherent words, which nevertheless both he and Sylvia understood well enough. All at once an ineffable tenderness had possessed him; life took on another hue. The beauty of the present hour might be fleeting, but at least it was well to have known it even for a moment.

The lightning continued to flash constantly in the large, dark hall, and the reverberation of the thunder was deafening, but it no longer had the power to alarm Sylvia; it is true it excited her and increased the tremor of her nerves, and made her quite unconsciously cling closely to Skelton, but it seemed to her as if they were together under the most beautiful sky and in the serenest air.

Presently thought returned to Skelton. Sylvia was now in the mood in which she could refuse him nothing; she had acknowledged that she loved him; now was the time to speak for Lewis, for the one passion had by no means swallowed up the other.

"Sylvia," said he in his most eloquent tones, and looking at her with his soul in his eyes, "could you forgive much in the past life of the man you loved? Think well before you answer, because some women who love much cannot forgive anything."

Sylvia turned very pale; she knew well enough what he meant; she knew he was making a plea for Lewis Pryor.

"Yes," she said, after a tremulous pause, "I could forgive much in the past. What is past is no injury to me; but I don't think I could be forgiving for any injury to *me*."

She had withdrawn a little from him, and her last words were spoken quite firmly and clearly and with unflinching eyes. Sylvia had a spirit of her own, and that was a time for plain speaking. She did not lose in Skelton's esteem by her boldness.

"Then we are agreed," answered Skelton with equal boldness; "for I shall have no forgiveness to ask in the future. I shall have to ask forgiveness for something in the past—something I cannot tell you now. I will write it to you. But I will say this: I believe you to be the most magnanimous woman in the world, and for that, partly, I love you."

There is a common delusion that all men make love alike. Never was there a greater mistake. There is no one particular in which a man of sense is more strongly differentiated from a fool than in his love-making. Skelton had the most exquisite tact in the world. He had to admit to his own wrongdoing, but he did it so adroitly that he easily won forgiveness. He had to make terms for Lewis, and he had to tell Sylvia that he could not make her a very rich woman; but he made the one appear the spontaneous act of Sylvia's generosity, and the other was the most powerful proof of his affection for her. So can a man of brains wrest disadvantage to his advantage.

Sylvia heard him through, making occasionally little faint stands against him that never amounted to anything. There was already treason in the citadel, and all she wanted was a chance to surrender. Skelton knew all the transformations of the cunning passion called love, and Sylvia's flutterings were those of a bird in the snare of the fowler.

An hour had passed since the storm had risen, and it was now dying away as rapidly as it had come up. Sylvia slipped from Skelton and went and stood by a window at the farther end of the hall. The exaltation was too keen; she craved a moment's respite from the torrent of her own happiness. When Skelton joined her and clasped her hand, both of them were calmer. They experienced the serener joy of thinking and talking over their happiness, instead of being engulfed in the tempest of feeling.

"But do you know, dear Sylvia," said Skelton, after a while, "that in marrying me you will not be marrying the richest man in Virginia?"

"I shall be marrying the finest man in Virginia, though," answered Sylvia, with a pretty air of haughty confidence.

"But still we sha'n't starve. We shall have Deerchase."

"I always liked Deerchase better than any place in the world."

"And you will have a middle-aged husband."

"I like middle age."

"Who has a bad habit of reading more hours than he ought to."

"Then I shall be rid of him much of the time. However, Lewis and I will manage to get on very well without you."

Skelton at that clasped her in his arms with real rapture. It was the one thing necessary to his happiness—the one condition he would exact of any woman—that Lewis should have what Skelton considered his rights. Triumph filled his heart. With that charming, spirited woman to help him, the little world around them would be forced to be on its good behaviour to Lewis. Sylvia, who was the most acute of women, saw in an instant that in this boy she had the most powerful hold on Skelton. Justice, and generosity, and inclination all urged her to be kind to the boy; but love, which is stronger than all, showed her that therein lay the secret of enormous power over Skelton.

But after a moment Sylvia said something which suddenly filled Skelton's soul with melancholy:

"Some day—when the great book is written—you will be the most famous man in the country, and I shall be the proudest woman," she said with a little vain, proud air.

The light died out of Skelton's eyes, and he could hardly resist a movement of impatience. Everywhere, even in his most sacred love, he was pursued by this phantom of what he was to do.

Sylvia presently sat down, and Skelton, drawing his chair near her, hung over her fondly. He knew perfectly well how to make her happy. He expressed in a hundred delicate ways the tenderness he felt for her; while Sylvia—proud Sylvia—was so meek and sweet that he scarcely knew her; so forgiving, so trustful. After all, thought Skelton, there was a philosophy better than that to be found in the books.

The storm was now over, and suddenly a mocking-bird outside the window burst into a heavenly song. Skelton went to the wide hall doors and threw them open. The sinking sun was shining upon a new heaven and a new earth. The trees, the grass, the shrubbery were diamonded with drops and sparkling brilliantly; the river ran joyously; the damp, sweet-scented air had a delicious freshness; all Nature was refreshed and glad. Skelton felt that it was like his own life—a sunset calm after a storm. He felt not only a happier man than he had been for many years, but a better man.

Half an hour after, when Skelton and Sylvia were sitting together in the cool, dark drawing-room, the door suddenly opened, and Mrs. Shapleigh sailed in, followed by old Tom. The sight that met their eyes might well paralyse them—Skelton, with his arm on Sylvia's chair, his dark head almost resting on her bright hair; her hand was raised to his lips. Being a self-possessed lover, he did not commit the *gaucherie* of dropping her hand, but held on to it firmly, saying coolly:

"Fairly caught, we are, Sylvia."

Mrs. Shapleigh uttered a faint shriek, while old Tom raised his bristling eyebrows up to the fringe of grey hair over his forehead.

Mrs. Shapleigh sank down, overcome by astonishment. Old Tom walked up to Skelton, and said, with a broad grin:

"So you have bamboozled my girl?"

"Completely," answered Skelton.

Sylvia at that got up and skurried out of the room, with Mrs. Shapleigh after her.

Mr. Shapleigh and his whilom ward faced each other.

"The game's up," was old Tom's remark.

"Apparently," answered Skelton, smiling; "and, as the consent of the father is usually asked, I am quite willing to ask it now."

"I don't know that it matters much in any case—least of all in this—because my daughter Sylvia has a spirit that I have never seen equalled in man or woman. I have sometimes seen horses who had it. That's your prospect, Skelton."

"I'll risk it gladly," answered Skelton, who knew well how to play the dauntless lover.

"And she has given in to you—the only creature, by Jove! she ever *did* give in to. But, Skelton, there's one thing—"

Skelton knew exactly what was coming.

"There is that boy, Lewis Pryor."

"Miss Shapleigh and I have agreed upon that," replied Skelton in a tone which put a stop to any further discussion. "If she is satisfied, nobody else can complain."

"Not even her parents?"

"See here, Mr. Shapleigh, we know each other too well to beat about the bush. You know your daughter will marry me if she says she will. You haven't just known her yesterday."

"She will, by the powers of heaven!" burst out Mr. Shapleigh; "and so, I suppose, as you say, it is hardly worth while to talk about it. But, for the sake of the thing, here's my hand and my consent with it."

"Thank you," answered Skelton, with grim politeness, and taking his hat at the same time.

He went back to Deerchase in a sort of exaltation not altogether free from melancholy. He had a feeling that too much of his life was gone—that, like the day's sun, which had shone so brilliantly before its setting, it was a dying glory. Things were becoming too pleasant to him. The giving up of so much money with so little reluctance seemed too easy to be normal, yet the fact that this charming Sylvia had taken him with such a diminished fortune contained the most intoxicating and subtile flattery. There had been something of this in his first marriage; but although he felt the extreme of tenderness, gratitude, and respect for his first wife, it had been more a marriage of gentle affection than profound passion. Skelton dimly realised what Bulstrode brutally proclaimed—that if somebody had not violently opposed that marriage it might never have taken place. But Sylvia Shapleigh had powerfully attracted him from the first. Skelton had a vein of fatalism about him. Like the old Greeks, he expected to pay a price for everything, and it did not surprise him that in the natural course of events he had to pay a great price for his Sylvia.

It was quite dusk when he stood on the bridge and looked first towards Belfield and then towards Deerchase. The twilight had fallen, and there were yellow lights about. Out in the river a vessel lay with a lantern at her masthead, that glimmered fitfully, showing the dusky outline of her hull against the shadowy mass of shore and sky. Afar off, at the negro quarters, a circle of dark figures sat around an outdoor fire, and a song faintly echoed from them. Skelton tried to distinguish Sylvia's window from the dark pile of the Belfield house, but could not, and smiled at himself for his folly, and was glad to know such folly. He was no mean philosopher in the actual experiences of life.

"Perhaps," he said, "now that I shall stop buying books by the thousand, I shall get something done in the way of work; and having assumed duties and claims, I shall not have all my time to myself, and so may be spurred to use it more successfully than I do now—for so runs life."

Neither Lewis nor Bulstrode suspected that anything unusual had happened to Skelton that night. Skelton longed to call Lewis to him and to tell him that he had a friend—that between Sylvia and himself he would have two as stout defenders as could be found; but he refrained for the moment. After dinner, though, when Skelton went out for his after-dinner smoke on the long, leafy, stone porch covered with climbing tea roses that were in all their midsummer glory, Lewis came too. This was very rare. But to-night he came out and sat looking at the river, and fondling his dog, as if merely for the pleasure of being there. He looked less sad, less shy than usual. The truth was, he was young and full of life, and he could not always be gloomy. Skelton talked to him a little, and the two sat together in the sweet, odorous night, until it was long past Lewis's bedtime. Presently, though, he began to yawn, and got up to go to bed; and when he said "Good-night," he went up to Skelton and touched his hand softly.

That touch went to Skelton's heart, as a baby's fingers go to the heart of the mother; he felt the deep, unmixed delight he had felt when Sylvia's radiant, adoring eyes had rested on his; it was one of those delicious moments of which there are too few in every life. Yes, Lewis was certainly beginning to love him.

"Good-night, my boy," said Skelton, laying his hand fondly on Lewis's shoulder.

Skelton was so profoundly happy as he walked up and down the long porch, his fine, expressive face so changed and softened, his black eyes luminous in the dark, that he asked himself if, after all, Fate would not demand something more than mere money in payment for so much that was sweet.

CHAPTER XX.

Next morning early, while Sylvia was yet dreaming, a tap came at her door, and a great basket of roses and a letter from Skelton were given to her. The letter told her, most delicately and artfully, what he had intimated the night before. He made a touching appeal for Lewis, and he even told her in detail about the disposition of the property without offending her—for nothing so vitiates sentiment as the talk of money. But there was nothing to vitiate it in the willingness, and even eagerness, that Skelton expressed to give up a fortune for her. Possibly he had not been quite so ready to do it as he professed; but he knew how to make a virtue of a necessity, and it lost nothing in his gallant way of putting it. Sylvia was quite sharp enough to see how ably he had managed awkward facts, and loved him none the less for it, and admired him considerably more. His money and his past were nothing to her. All that any human being can claim of another is the present and the future.

There had been a tremendous commotion at Belfield after Skelton had left the evening before, but Sylvia scarcely remembered a word of it next morning. The only fact her mind dwelt on was that

Skelton loved her. One thing, though, Mrs. Shapleigh had promptly resolved before she had closed her eyes the night before, which was, that the trip to the Springs must be given up. Sylvia had landed the leviathan of the matrimonial pool, and Mrs. Shapleigh could not bear to tear herself away from the county in the first flush of her triumph. It is true it was not the custom in those days and in that region to announce engagements, but, nevertheless, Mrs. Shapleigh had no doubt it would get out, and had convincing reasons for so believing. Old Tom was far from objecting to the abandonment of the trip to the Springs. He was not particularly anxious to go himself, and it cost a pretty penny to transport Mrs. Shapleigh and Sylvia and the maid, and the coachman and two horses, nearly four hundred miles from the seaboard to the Alleghany Mountains, and it was destructive to the family coach and usually foundered the horses.

When Sylvia was greeted at breakfast with the announcement that the trip to the Springs was off, naturally it did not grieve her in the least.

Mrs. Shapleigh—good soul!—started upon a round of visits that very morning to give a number of extraordinary and purposeless reasons why the trip was abandoned, and everywhere she went she let the cat out of the bag, to old Tom's infinite diversion, who went along. Newington was the last place they went to. Blair met them at the door with his usual cordiality, and squeezed Mrs. Shapleigh's hand and ogled her as if she had been twenty-five instead of fifty—to Mrs. Shapleigh's obvious delight, although she archly reproved him.

The place, and the master and the mistress of it, looked more prosperous than for many years past; but close observers might see that Blair and his wife were not quite what they had once been; there was a little rift in the lute. Both of them, however, were genuinely glad to see the Shapleighs, who were among the best of friends and neighbours. Mrs. Blair asked after Sylvia, and then the murder was out. Mrs. Shapleigh began:

"Sitting at home in the drawing-room, mooning with Richard Skelton. He was over there all yesterday during the storm, and one would think they had said everything on earth they could think of to each other, but evidently they haven't. I can't imagine what they find to talk about, for Richard Skelton never knows any news.—What ails you, Mr. Shapleigh?"

"Nothing at all," answered old Tom, grinning delightedly, "except that I'd like to see Richard Skelton's countenance if he could hear you this minute."

"Well, I'm sure Mr. Skelton is quite welcome to hear anything I have to say. I say he never knows any news—and so he does not, Mr. Shapleigh. Mr. Skelton may be able to write a great philosophical work that will lose his own soul, I haven't the slightest doubt, but as for knowing what's going on in the county—why, he knows no more than my shoe. But Sylvia thinks he's delightful, news or no news."

"There you go," apostrophised Mr. Shapleigh, taking out his big snuff-box and indulging himself in a huge pinch. Blair usually would have been highly amused at Mrs. Shapleigh, and would have wickedly kept her upon the ticklish subject. Instead, however, a strange, intense look flashed into his countenance as he quietly turned his eyes full on his wife's face. Elizabeth grew pale. If Skelton was to be married to Sylvia Shapleigh—and there had been much talk about it lately—the crisis was at hand.

Old Tom knew there was a mystery about the disposition of the main part of Skelton's money in the event of his death or marriage, and thought it not unlikely that the Blairs would have an interest in it. So, as they sat there, simple country gentry as they were, leading the quietest provincial lives, and talking about their every-day affairs, there was that mixture of tragedy that is seldom absent from the comedy of life. Mrs. Shapleigh went into another long-winded explanation of why they had determined at the last minute to give up the trip to the Springs. At every reason she gave Mr. Shapleigh grinned more and more incredulously; but, when she got up to go, neither Mr. nor Mrs. Blair was in the slightest doubt as to the real reason.

Blair put Mrs. Shapleigh into the carriage, gave old Tom an arm, and came back in the house to his wife.

Elizabeth saw in a moment that a subtile change had come over him. Since he had given up the race course and had devoted himself to the plantation he had looked a different man. An expression of peace had come into his ruddy, mobile face; he was no longer hunted and driven by creditors of the worst kind; he did not live, as he once had, on the frightful edge of expecting a horse's legs to give out, or his wind, or something equally important. It is true that he was haunted by the possible fortune, but it did not keep him from attending to his legitimate business, as horse racing had done. Now, however, his face was full of lines; some fierce, sensual self seemed to have come uppermost and to have altogether changed him. Elizabeth remembered about that black horse, and she began to think how long would Blair be able to keep off the turf with money in his pockets. And if he should get so much money as the Skelton fortune would be, Mrs. Blair's feminine good sense told her unerringly that it would not be good for Blair.

"Well," he said, standing up before her in the cool drawing-room, darkened at midday from the August sun, "Skelton is going to be married to Sylvia Shapleigh. There is no earthly doubt about it."

Mrs. Blair quite agreed with him, but her face did not wear the look of uneasy triumph that glowed darkly upon her husband's.

"I have not heard from England yet, but I feel perfectly certain that the day he is married his wife's fortune will be handed over to his heirs."

"Lewis Pryor is his heir," answered Mrs. Blair.

"How do you know it?" cried Blair. "Did not Bulstrode tell you that he thought it would be very hard for Skelton to prove it?"

"But Mr. Bulstrode is not a man of very good judgment about those things. He felt sorry for me the night he told me. He was angry with Mr. Skelton; he says he thinks Lewis will be better off without the money than with it; and so, putting all those things together, he concluded that we would get it. But I know Richard Skelton well, and I know that he would not accept of his own happiness at the price of enriching us; and he adores that boy. You are deceiving yourself if you think one stiver of it will ever be ours."

Blair looked at his wife with deep displeasure in his face.

"I don't believe you want that money, and I know very well the reason why. You are afraid of money for me."

Mrs. Blair did not deny it, but sat, in pale distress, looking into her husband's face. They loved each other well, in spite of that estrangement, and Blair got up and went to her and took her hand.

"Elizabeth, I swear to you, all the animosity I feel towards Skelton arose first through the love I had for you. Had he not interfered with me when you and I were first lovers, Skelton and I should have been jolly good fellows together; but I've got into the habit of hating him, my dear, for your sake, and it's not easy to leave off."

This old, old flattery never failed with Elizabeth, nor did it fail now.

The whole county was agog in a week over Skelton's affairs. The disposition of his fortune became more and more puzzling and interesting when it was perfectly well understood that the time for the solution of the mystery was near at hand. But Skelton himself and Sylvia Shapleigh knew, or thought they knew, just what would happen about it.

Skelton, who was a model lover, pressed for an early date for the marriage to come off, and the late autumn was named. This gave him time to work on Lewis. He took the boy into the library one day and told him the whole story of the coming marriage, laying especial stress on the fact that Deerchase would still be his home and Sylvia his friend. The great news pleased the boy, and Skelton fondly hoped that it had reconciled him; but before the interview was out Skelton saw it had not. Only, instead of being obstinate and stiff-necked, Lewis begged, with tears in his eyes, that Skelton would not make it public.

"I need not, unless the Blairs put in their claim. The whole thing is in Bulstrode's hands," said Skelton with his unbroken forbearance.

But Lewis, on leaving the room, reiterated that he would never admit that he was not Lewis Pryor as long as he had a fighting chance. And, as on every occasion that it had been spoken of, Skelton gloried in the boy's spirit with a melancholy joy. Something else besides pride in Lewis and affection for Sylvia made Skelton happy then. His mind seemed to awaken from its torpor, induced by excess of reading. All at once he felt the creative power rise within him like sap in a tree. The very night after he had pledged himself to Sylvia he went to the library to read, and suddenly found himself writing. The pen, which had been so hateful to him, became quickly natural to his hand. He cast aside his great volumes of notes, at which he had been used to gaze with a furious sense of being helpless and overweighted, and wrote as readily and as rapidly as in the old days when he had written Voices of the People. Of course, it was not done in the same spirit; he realised he was making only the first rough draft of a work that would still take him years to bring into shape; but it was a beginning, and he had been fifteen years trying to make that beginning. A deep sense of happiness possessed him. At last, at last he had the thing which had eluded him. All at once good gifts were showered upon him. He felt a profound gratitude to Sylvia, for her touch that waked his heart seemed to wake his intellect too. The lotus eater suddenly cast aside the lotus and became a man.

Every day Sylvia claimed a part of his day, but the remaining hours were worth months to him in that recent time when he was nothing better than an intellectual dram drinker. Bulstrode saw it, and said to him:

"If you live long enough, you'll write that book."

If he lived long enough! But why should he not live?

That night, sitting alone in the library, working eagerly and effectively at that great preliminary plan, he remembered Bulstrode's remark, and went and looked at himself in a small mirror in a corner to examine the signs of age upon him. Yes, the lines were there. But then the ever-sweet consciousness came to him that Sylvia did not think him old; that Sylvia would marry him to-morrow and go to live in the overseer's house if he asked her. It came with a sweetness of consolation to him. He was at the very point where the old age of youth had not yet merged into the youth of old age; forty was a good deal older in 1820 than in 19—.

There was one person, though, who thought forty was very old—for a man, although fifty was comparatively young for a woman—and that was Mrs. Shapleigh. That excellent woman was in mortal terror of her future son-in-law, but she revenged herself by great freedom in her remarks about him behind his back, as far as she dared, to Sylvia.

Sylvia was indubitably a perfect fool about Skelton, as her mother reminded her a dozen times a day. When Sylvia would cunningly place herself at a window which looked across the fields to Deerchase, Mrs. Shapleigh would remark fretfully:

"Sylvia, I declare you behave like a lunatic about Richard Skelton. I'm sure I was as much in love with your father as any well brought up girl might be, but I assure you it never cost me a wink of sleep."

"Very probably, mamma."

"And I was so afraid some one would know it, that I never breathed a word of our engagement to a soul. It's true, some people suspected it after we went to a party at Newington and danced ten quadrilles together, one after the other, but I denied we were engaged up to two weeks before the wedding."

"Did you say ten quadrilles, mamma?"

"Yes, ten."

"I'm sure Mr. Skelton and I will never dance ten quadrilles in one evening with each other."

"And your father was a much younger and handsomer man than Richard Skelton, who has crow's-feet in the corners of his eyes."

"I like crow's-feet. They impart an air of thoughtful distinction to a man."

"And Mr. Skelton has a bald place as big as a dollar on the top of his head. Does that add an air of thoughtful distinction, too?"

"Of course it does. There is something captivating in Mr. Skelton's baldness; it is unique, like himself. It makes me more and more delighted at the idea that I am going to be married to him."

"Sylvia!" shrieked Mrs. Shapleigh, "do you dare to be so bold and forward as to say that you *want* to marry Mr. Skelton?"

"Yes, indeed, mamma—dreadfully."

Mrs. Shapleigh raised her hands and let them fall in her lap in despair.

"For a girl to acknowledge such a thing! Now, if you wanted to be mistress of Deerchase, there'd be no harm in it; but to want to marry a man because you are in love with him! Dear, dear, dear! what is the world coming to?"

Sylvia laughed with shameless merriment at this, and just then the door opened and old Tom came in.

"Mr. Shapleigh," began Mrs. Shapleigh in a complaining voice, "Sylvia's not at all like me."

"Not a bit," cheerfully assented old Tom.

"She isn't ashamed to say that she is in love with Richard Skelton, and wants to marry him. Nobody ever heard me say, Mr. Shapleigh, that I was in love with you, or wanted to marry you."

"No, indeed, madam. It was not worth while. You hung upon me like ivy on a brick wall."

"La, Mr. Shapleigh, how you talk!"

"And I'm sure, my love, if anybody doubts my devotion to you during your lifetime, they'd never doubt it after you're dead. I'll engage to wear more crape and weepers than any ten widowers in the county."

This always shut Mrs. Shapleigh up. Sylvia gave her father a reproving look, but she was too much used to this kind of thing to take it seriously. Old Tom, though, indulged in his sly rallying too.

"Well, my girl, a nice establishment you'll have at Deerchase. I swear, I'd throw Bulstrode and Bob Skinny in the river, both of 'em, and let the fishes eat 'em. However, if you can stand Skelton for a husband, you can stand anything."

"Only give me a chance to stand Mr. Skelton, papa," answered Sylvia demurely.

"If the house were to catch afire, I wonder which Skelton would think of first—you or his books?"

"The books, of course," responded Sylvia, with easy sarcasm. "Wives come cheaper than books."

"I'd like to see Richard Skelton's face the first time you cross him."

"You would see a very interesting face, papa—not very young, perhaps, but one that age cannot wither nor custom stale."

"Sylvia, my child, you are a fool!"

"Only about Mr. Skelton, papa."

"Lord, Lord, what are we coming to!"

"I know what *I'm* coming to, papa. I am coming to be the wife of the finest man in the world, and the kindness and condescension of Mr. Skelton in wanting to marry me I never can be sufficiently grateful for—" At which, in the midst of a shriek of protest from Mrs. Shapleigh, Sylvia ran out of the room.

CHAPTER XXI.

As the time went by, with this new-found happiness and energy Skelton began every day to take more optimistic views of the future. If only the Blairs would keep quiet, the story about Lewis might remain unknown to the world at large indefinitely; and how excellent would this be for all—for the boy, for Sylvia, and for Skelton himself.

There was, of course, one way of inducing Blair to say nothing and to make no attempts to prove what he considered his rights, and that was to offer him a sum of money in hand for his shadowy prospects in the future. At first, this plan was intolerably distasteful to Skelton; he only thought of it to dismiss it. But however he might dismiss it, still it returned. It is true it would give aid and comfort to his enemy, but it would also give peace and pleasure to the only two persons on earth whom he loved; for he was certain that, however Sylvia might be willing to brave talk for his sake, it would be an immeasurable relief to her to know that there would be no talk. Skelton also knew perfectly well that the Blairs stood no show whatever; for, even if Lewis should die, the Blairs could not inherit from him, because in the eyes of the law he was no relation to them, and it had pleased Skelton to think how completely he could checkmate Blair at every turn. But once the plan had entered his mind, his relentless and logical good sense forced him to consider it. He thought so much more clearly and rapidly and conclusively than the ordinary man that in a very little time his mind had made itself up. He did not all at once love Blair, but he saw that, in order to effect a great gain for the only two beings he loved in the world, he must agree to benefit his enemy; and so, under new and better influences, he brought himself to yield. As Bulstrode was Lewis's guardian, of course Skelton could arrange with him as he chose.

When his determination was finally fixed, he told Bulstrode, who said:

"Humph! Best thing you could do. Perhaps the story about Lewis may never be positively known. *I* don't want to publish it, and he doesn't, and you don't; so just get the Blairs to hold their tongues, and it need not be known any farther than it is now, for God knows how long—perhaps not until you and I both are dust. Dear, sweet Mrs. Blair can hold her tongue, I warrant, if any of the sex can."

Bulstrode, fearing that, after all, the Blairs stood no chance, was glad for his dear Mrs. Blair to get enough to put her beyond the reach of poverty.

Skelton felt compelled to mention it to Sylvia. Her relief at the thought that the story need not be published broadcast was so intense that Skelton saw that she had suffered much from the apprehension of it. As she had said not one word about it, he was touched at her reticence and self-sacrifice. He smiled at the thought that he was being influenced by a woman and a boy, and the trio was completed when the parson finished the job. Conyers coming down to Deerchase on a visit about that time, Skelton, very unexpectedly to the clergyman, talked the subject over with him on ethical grounds. Naturally, Conyers endorsed the idea that Skelton's money could not be put to a better use than to helping Mrs. Blair and her children; and so, by the three influences that Skelton was supposed to be least governed, he made up his mind to do that which a year before he would have scoffed at. Conyers's ideas on matters of right and wrong were so clear and logical, he was so little befogged by interest and prejudice, that Skelton could not but respect his opinion. True, his mind was made up when he talked with Conyers about the matter; but the clergyman's clearness of belief that the thing was right nullified some of the old restless hatred of Blair.

"Of course, we shall hate each other as long as we live," said Skelton, in his cynically good-natured way, when talking with Conyers about Blair. "But, however Blair may congratulate himself on getting something for nothing—for that is what it is—I shall get a great deal more. I shall keep people from knowing my private affairs for at least several years to come, and that is worth a fortune to any man."

Skelton acted promptly on his decision. He wrote Blair briefly and clearly how things stood, but that, if he would refrain from making any attempt to prove his supposed claims to the property upon Skelton's approaching marriage, a modest sum in ready money would be forthcoming. He offered

Blair every facility for finding out the actual state of the case, and invited him to come over to Deerchase and consult about it.

Blair told his wife, who, woman-like, advised him to take the bird in the hand.

But during the discussion in the Deerchase library one mild September morning, between the two men, the whole thing liked to have fallen through. Blair saw so conclusively he had no show that he perceived he was accepting hush money. This his pride could by no means admit, and he professed not to consider Skelton's proofs so positive as Skelton thought them. This angered Skelton. He saw in a moment where the shoe pinched. The sum that Skelton offered him was by no means commensurate with the interests he was giving up, if he had any interests at all; but still it would put him on his feet; it would make him solvent; he would once more be a free man. But Blair would not acknowledge this; he professed to be quite indifferent to it, and, as men will do under such circumstances, declared he preferred that the law should settle it. It was as much as Skelton could do to refrain from calling him a fool. However, Blair was no fool; he was only an intensely human man, who loved and hated as most men do, and who wanted to satisfy his creditors, but who did not like the idea of his enemy knowing that he was taking money for holding his tongue because his rights in the matter had proved to be a chimera. It looked at one time as if the final word would be a disagreement. Skelton sat on one side of the table, with a contemptuous half-smile on his countenance, drawing pen-and-ink sketches upon scraps of paper.

Blair sat on the other side, his face as black as midnight. But in the end Skelton's strong determination prevailed on Blair's more violent but less certain will power; coolness prevailed over hot-headedness, reason over unreason. At the very last, when Blair had yielded and agreed to take some thousands of dollars, a strange thing happened to Skelton. A perfectly sudden, overpowering, and phenomenal generosity seized upon him. All at once he realised how hard he had been upon Blair's susceptibilities; Blair was a gentleman, and high-strung for all his faults; it was humiliating to him to want the money so badly that he was obliged to take it; he would have liked to have flung it in Skelton's face; and, thinking this over rapidly, without a word Skelton sat down, pulled the completed draft of the agreement toward him, and doubled the first figure of the sum named.

Blair could hardly believe his eyes. He looked at Skelton for fully five minutes, while the thing was slowly impressing itself upon his mind. His face flushed scarlet; his lips worked; he was deeply agitated. Skelton walked to the window and looked out. His eyes sought the river, and fell upon a boat with its one white sail gleaming like silver in the morning light; and in the boat were Sylvia and Lewis. His heart stirred; those two young creatures were doing their work of humanising him.

Presently Blair spoke some incoherent words of thanks, and Skelton turned. The two enemies of long standing faced each other. It was a moment exquisitely painful to both. Skelton, in being generous, could be thoroughly so; and he was more anxious to escape from Blair than Blair was to escape from him. He motioned with his hand deprecatingly and rang the bell. Bob Skinny appeared, and Skelton directed him to call Mr. Bulstrode and Miles Lightfoot. Skelton had no mind to take up any more time in the business than he could help. The subject was distasteful to him, and he intended to settle it all at one sitting. Likewise he employed no lawyer. He was lawyer enough for so simple a thing as an agreement of that sort; so in two minutes it was signed, witnessed, and sealed, and Blair had Skelton's cheque in his pocket. Blair went off, half dazed, with his cheque and his agreement in his breast pocket. Skelton put his copy in his strong box, and when he had turned the key upon it he felt as if he had locked up his hatred with it. Bulstrode wanted to see him about some work he had finished, and Miles Lightfoot was eager to tell him something about his horses, but Skelton sent them both off impatiently. He was in no mood for books or horses then. He threw himself in his chair and enjoyed for the first time the luxury of befriending an enemy. Strange, strange feeling!

CHAPTER XXII.

About one o'clock Lewis returned from his sail. Skelton had come out of the library then, and was walking up and down the stone porch. He had just got a note from Mrs. Blair—the most grateful, affectionate note. Skelton put it in his pocket to show Sylvia that afternoon, having promised himself the luxury of her sweet approval.

Lewis came up to him and began to tell, boy fashion, of the sail he had down the river; the wonderful speed of his boat; how Sylvia had been frightened at a few white caps, and how he had reassured her. Skelton listened smiling. Lewis was a little vain of his accomplishments as a sailor. Then, after a few moments, Skelton said to him gravely:

"Lewis, you remember what you are so anxious that no one should know about you?"

"Yes, sir," answered Lewis, blushing.

"I have arranged so that I do not think it will be known for some years certainly—possibly never. Mr. Blair, Mr. Bulstrode, and I have arranged it."

The boy looked at him with shining eyes. "Some years" sounds like "forever" to extreme youth. His face was expressive with delight. He came up to Skelton, and of his own accord laid his hand timidly upon Skelton's arm. It was the second time in his life that he had ever done such a thing, and the first time he had ever seen Skelton overcome with emotion. He looked at the boy with an intensity of affection that was moving; a mist came into his eyes. He rose and walked quickly to the end of the porch, leaving Lewis standing by his empty chair—amazed, touched, at what he saw before him. Skelton's weakness was womanish, but he did not feel ashamed of it. He felt that in the boy's heart the natural affection was quickening for which he had longed with a great longing.

After a while he turned and made some ordinary remark to Lewis, who answered him in the same way; but there was a sweet, ineffable change in their attitude one to the other. Nature had her rights, and she had vindicated herself. Lewis fondly thought the disgrace that he dreaded was forever removed from him, and no longer struggled against that feeling of a son for his father that had been steadily growing in his breast, although as steadily repressed, ever since he had known really who he was.

As for Skelton, he walked down towards the river in a kind of ecstasy. The boy's heart was his. No lover winning his mistress ever felt a more delicious triumph.

As he strolled along by the cedar hedges near the river, and the masses of crape myrtle and syringa, that could withstand the salt air and the peevish winds of winter, he began to consider all his new sources of happiness. There was the deep, tumultuous joy of Sylvia's love, and the profound tenderness he felt for Lewis, that had only grown the more for the stern subduing of it; and there was that awakened creative power which made him feel like a new man. And the spectre of his hatred of Blair had been laid at least for a time—no one can hate the being one has just benefited. And then, looking about him, he felt that Deerchase was not a possession to be despised. He had seen too much real grandeur to overestimate the place; yet it was singularly beautiful, not only with the beauty of green old gardens and giant trees that clustered around the stately house, and noble expanses of velvety turf and dewy woods, but it had that rich beauty of a great, productive, landed estate. Nature was not only lovely, but she was beneficent. Those green fields brought forth lavishly year after year. There was room, and work, and food for all. Skelton saw, half a mile inland, the negroes weeding out the endless ranks of the corn, then as high as a man's head, and flaunting its splendid green banners magnificently in the August air. The toilers were merry, and sang as they worked; two or three other negroes were half working, half idling about the grounds, in careless self-content; Bob Skinny sunned himself under a tree, with his "fluke" across his knee; and the peacock strutted up and down haughtily on the velvet grass. The river was all blue and gold, and a long summer swell broke upon the sandy shore. All the beauty of the scene seemed to enter into Skelton's soul. It was exactly attuned to his feelings. He did not long for mountain heights and lonely peaks or wind-lashed waves; this sweet scene of peace and plenty was in perfect harmony with him.

He was too happy to work then, but he felt within him a strange power to work within a few hours. As soon as night came he would go to the library; those long evenings of slothful dreaming and reading and painful idleness were no more; he would manage to do a full stint of work before midnight. He had written in the morning to Sylvia that he would not see her that day. He had apprehended that after his interview with Blair he might not be in the most heavenly frame of mind, but, on the contrary, he was so unexpectedly happy that he longed to go to Belfield then. But Sylvia would not be ready to see him; she would be taking a midday nap after her morning sail; he would go at his usual hour in the afternoon and surprise her.

He continued to stroll about, his straw hat in his hand, that he might feel the soft south wind upon his forehead, and it reminded him of when he was a boy. How closely Lewis resembled him!—his ways, his tastes, were all the same, except healthier than his own had been. He never remembered the time when he had not withdrawn himself haughtily from his companions. Lewis was as proud and reserved as he had been, though from an altogether different motive; for with poor Lewis it was the reserve of a wounded soul. Skelton remembered well how, in his boyhood, he had lived in his boat, just as Lewis did, spending long hours lying flat in the bottom, merely exerting himself enough to keep the boat from overturning, and going far down into the bay, where the water was dark and troubled, instead of being blue and placid as it was in the broad and winding river.

All day until five o'clock the beauty held. At that time Skelton came out on the stone porch to take his way across the bridge to Belfield. The sky had not lost its perfect blueness, but great masses of dense white clouds were piling up, and a low bank of dun color edged the western sky. The wind, too, was rising, and far down, beyond Lone Point, the white caps were tumbling over each other, and the wide bay was black and restless. Just as Skelton came out he saw the one snow-white sail of Lewis's boat rounding Lone Point.

Bulstrode was sitting on the porch, snuffing at the rich tea roses, and with the inevitable book in his hand; but he looked uneasy.

"I wish," he said to Skelton, "you'd speak to the boy about going out in that boat in all sorts of weather. There's a storm coming up outside, and nothing will please him more than to be caught in it, and to come home and tell you how near he came to being drowned. You taught him to manage a boat much too well. He takes all manner of risks, by Jove!"

"He is venturesome to the last degree," replied Skelton, "and I cannot make him otherwise. But, as you know"—Skelton smiled, and hesitated a moment—"I suffer all sorts of palpitations when he is in danger. Yet, if he shirked it, I should detest him." Bulstrode raised his shaggy brows significantly; he knew all this well enough without Skelton's telling him. In a moment Skelton added:

"It has also been a satisfaction to me to see this spirit in him, for it indicates he will be a man of action. I entreat you, Bulstrode, if you should outlive me, never let him become a mere dreamer. I would rather see him squander every dollar that will be his, if the possession of it should make him a mere *dilettante*—what I have been so long, but which I shall never be again, by heaven!"

Bulstrode looked surprised. He could not imagine why a dissipated old hulk like himself should outlast Skelton, who was in the most perfect vigour of manhood. As he watched Skelton walking across the lawn to the bridge he could not but observe his grace, his thoroughbred air, the indescribable something that made other men commonplace beside him.

"Don't wonder the women fall in love with you!" he growled, returning to his book.

Over at Belfield, Sylvia, with the train of her white gown over her arm, was walking daintily through the old-fashioned garden to an arbour, at the end of the main walk, with a rustic table and chairs in it. In good weather she and Skelton passed many hours there. Sylvia was quite alone this afternoon. Her father and mother had gone up the county for a two days' visit, and left her at home perforce, because she would not go with them. Sylvia was, indeed, completely under Skelton's spell. His word was law, his presence was everything. She felt acutely disappointed that she would not see him that day, but she would go to the arbour and fondly cheat herself into the belief that he would come. In the old days Sylvia had been a great reader, but under the new dispensation when she read at all she read idly—sweet verses, which were merely an epitome of that greater story of life and love that she was studying for herself. She went into the arbour and sat down, and spread Skelton's note out upon the little table. What perfect notes he wrote !—brief and to the point, but exquisitely graceful—one of those gallant accomplishments that he excelled in. One round white arm supported her charming head; the other hung down at her side, the hand half open, as if her lover had just dropped it. Sylvia was as pretty a disconsolate picture as could be imagined when Skelton walked into the arbour. She started up, a beautiful rosy blush suddenly dawning.

"Here I am, like an old fool," said Skelton, smiling as he took her hand. "I concluded I couldn't come, but then the wish to see you was too strong for me. See what a havoc you have made in my middle-aged heart!"

"Your heart, at least, is not middle-aged," answered Sylvia, with a sweet, insinuating smile; "and I wish," she added with bold mendacity, "that you had some crow's-feet and grey hairs. I adore crow's-feet and grey hairs."

"I think you can find some of both to adore," answered Skelton, with rather a grim smile in return.

They were close by the rustic seat, and both of them sat down, Skelton's arm just touching her rounded shoulder. The air had grown dark, and there was a kind of twilight in the arbour. They seemed as much alone as if they had been in the depths of the woods, instead of in an old-fashioned garden.

"I shall have to build you a summerhouse at Deerchase," said Skelton. "There is a pretty spot in the garden, near the river, where the roses have climbed all over an old latticework left standing since my mother's time."

"And shall there be a tea table for me?"

"Yes, a tea table—"

Sylvia knitted her pretty brows.

"I don't know what we shall do about Mr. Bulstrode and the tea table. You and Lewis and I are just company enough, but Mr. Bulstrode will not fit in at all."

Sylvia was quite clever enough to see that Skelton did not intend to have Lewis left out of any scheme of happiness in which he was concerned, and therefore wisely included him.

"I think," said Skelton, "we will have to leave Bulstrode out of that little idyl. Bulstrode likes—reveres you, as he does all good and charming women, but he is undoubtedly afraid of women. He will probably take up his quarters in the wing, and only prowl about the library. But you and I and Lewis will be very happy. The boy loves you, and, Sylvia," continued Skelton, with his sweetest eloquence of voice and look, "you have no conception of how he longs for affection. He is very proud and sensitive, and—poor little soul!—he has no friends but you and me and Bulstrode, I think."

"*I* mean to be his friend," said Sylvia in a low voice.

"And I, too, felt that longing for affection until—until—" Skelton finished the sentence by kissing Sylvia's fair red mouth.

After a while Skelton told her delicately about the interview with Blair, except that voluntary doubling of what he had first given him. Sylvia listened, and thought Skelton certainly the most magnanimous man on earth. She quite forgot that Blair had a score against Skelton, and a long one, too.

The late afternoon grew dark; the white clouds became a copper red, the dark line at the horizon rose angrily and covered the heavens. The air turned chilly, and the wind came up wildly from the bay. One of the northwest storms peculiar to the season and the latitude was brewing fast. But Skelton and Sylvia were quite oblivious of it—strangely so for Skelton, who was rarely forgetful or unobservant of what went on around him. But that whole day had been an epoch with him. When had he a whole day of complete happiness in his life? How many days can any mortal point to when one has become happy, has become generous, has become beloved? Yet, such had been this day with Skelton. Sylvia, who had been dear to him before, became dearer. Something in the time, the spot, the aloneness, waked a deeper passion in him than he had felt before. He forgot for the first time how the hours were flying. He could not have told, to save his life, how long he had sat in that half darkness, with Sylvia's soft head upon his breast, her hand trembling in his. A sweet intoxication, different from anything he had ever felt before, possessed him. Suddenly the wind, which had soughed mournfully among the trees, rose to a shriek. It flung a rose branch full in Sylvia's face, and a dash of cold rain came with it. Skelton started, rudely awakened from his dream. It was dark within the arbour and dark outside. What light still lingered in the sullen sky was a pale and ghastly glare. The river looked black, and, as the wind came screaming in from the ocean, it dashed the water high over the sandy banks. A greater change could not be imagined than from the soft beauty of the afternoon.

Skelton and Sylvia both rose at the same moment. The rain had turned to hail; the storm that had been gathering all the afternoon at last burst upon them. In half a moment Sylvia's white dress was drenched. As they stood at the entrance to the arbour, Skelton, with his arm around her, about to make a dash for the house, turned and glanced over his shoulder towards the river, and there, in the black and angry water, storm-tossed and lashed by the wind, a boat was floating bottom upwards. There had evidently not been time to take the sail down, and every minute it would disappear under the seething waves and then come up again—and clinging to the bottom of the boat was a drenched boyish figure that both Skelton and Sylvia recognised in a moment. It was Lewis Pryor. His hat was gone, and his jacket too; he was holding on desperately to the bottom of the boat, and the hurricane was driving the cockleshell down the river at a furious rate.

Skelton uttered an exclamation like a groan and pointed to the boat.

"See!" he cried, "he can scarcely hold on—he has probably been hurt. Go, dearest, go at once to the house; I must go to the boy."

There was a boat at the wharf, and the negroes, who had collected on the shore and were shrieking and running about wildly, were foolishly trying to raise the sail. In that one quick moment of parting, as Skelton's eyes fell upon Sylvia's, he saw in them an agony of apprehension for him. It was no saf matter to venture out in the violence of a northwest storm in the shallow pleasure boat that lay tossing at the wharf, with the negroes vainly and excitedly toiling at the sail, which the wind beat out of their strong hands like a whip. But Sylvia did not ask him to stay. Skelton pressed her once to his heart; he felt gratitude to her that she did not strive uselessly to detain him. He ran to the water's edge, and just as he reached it the sail, which had been got up, ripped in two with a loud noise, and the mast snapped short off. The rope, though, that held the boat to the wharf did not give way, and a dozen stalwart negroes held on to it.

Meanwhile, Lewis's boat, that had been dimly visible through the hail and the mist, disappeared. The negroes uttered a loud shriek, which was echoed from the Deerchase shore by the crowd assembled there. Skelton's wildly beating heart stood still, but in the next minute the boat reappeared some distance farther down the river. Lewis had slightly changed his position. He still hung on manfully, but he was not in as good a place as before. The sail, which still held, acted as a drag, so that the progress of the boat, although terribly swept and tossed about, was not very rapid.

At the wharf it took a moment or two to clear away the broken mast and the rags of the sail. Two oars were in the bottom of the boat. As Skelton was about to spring into it he turned, and saw Sylvia standing on the edge of the wharf, her hands clasped, her hair half down and beaten about her pale face by the fierce gust, her white dress soaked with the rain. She had followed him involuntarily. In the excitement, and in his fierce anxiety for Lewis, Skelton had not until that moment thought of the danger to himself. But one look into Sylvia's face showed him that she remembered it might be the last time on this earth that they would look into each other's eyes. And in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, Skelton's passion for Lewis took its proper proportion—he loved Sylvia infinitely best at that moment. As if Fate would punish him for ever letting the boy's claim interfere with the woman's, he was called upon to take his life in his hand—that life that she had so beautifully transformed for that boy's sake.

And as Sylvia stood, in the rain and wind, Skelton holding her cold hands and looking at her with a desperate affection, some knowledge came from his soul to hers that at last she was supreme. Skelton himself felt that, when he set out upon that storm-swept river, he would indeed be setting out upon another river that led to a shoreless sea. This new, sweet life was saying to him, "Hail and farewell!"

They had not stood thus for more than a minute, but it seemed a lifetime to both. When it dawned upon Sylvia that nothing short of Lewis's cry for life could draw Skelton from her, a smile like moonlight passed over her pallid face. She had the same presentiment that Skelton had—he would never return alive. It was as if they heard together the solemn tolling of the bell that marked the passing of their happiness. But not even death itself could rob Sylvia of that one perfect moment. Then, out of the roar of the storm came a cry from Lewis.

Skelton raised Sylvia's hands and let them drop again. Neither spoke a word, and the next moment he was in the boat, that both wind and tide seized and drove down the river like an eggshell.

Skelton had two oars, but they did him little good. He could not direct the boat at all; the wind that was blowing all the water out of the river blew him straight down towards Lone Point. He felt sure that he was following Lewis, and no doubt gaining on him, as he had no wet sail dragging after him, but the darkness had now descended. It was not more than seven o'clock, but it might have been midnight.

Suddenly a terrific squall burst roaring upon the storm already raging. Skelton could hear the hurricane screaming before it struck him. He turned cold and faint when he thought about the boy clinging to the boat in the darkness. He was still trying to use his oars when the squall struck him. One oar was wrenched out of his hand as if it had been a straw, the other one broke in half.

At that Skelton quietly dropped his arms, and a strange composure succeeded his agony of fear and apprehension about Lewis. He could now do nothing more for Lewis, and nothing for himself. He was athletic, although neither tall nor stout; but he did not have Lewis's young litheness, and he was already much exhausted. There would be no clinging for hours to the bottom of the boat for him, and he was no swimmer; he would make a fight for his life, but he felt it would be of no avail. And Sylvia! As he recalled her last look upon him, he beat his forehead against the side of the boat like a madman;

but the momentary wildness departed as quickly as it came. The recollection that he was on the threshold of another world calmed him with the awful majesty of the thought. He said to himself, "Sylvia understands—and she will never forget!" All sorts of strange ideas came crowding upon him in the darkness. All around him was a world of black and seething waters and shrieking winds. Could this be that blue and placid river upon which so much of his boyhood had been spent? Almost the first thing he remembered was standing at the windows of his nursery, when he was scarcely more than a baby, watching the dimpling shadows on the water, and wondering if it were deep enough to drown a very little boy. And he had lived in his boat as a boy, just as Lewis did. Then he remembered the September afternoon, so long ago, when he had taken Sylvia in his boat, and that night just such a terrible storm had come up as this; the bridge had been washed away, and the tide had overflowed all the flower beds at Deerchase and had come almost up to the hall door. He remembered the morning after, when he left Deerchase—the river, as far as eye could reach, a gigantic lagoon, muddy and turbulent. Would it look like that the next morning? and would a person drowned that night be found within a few hours? He did not remember ever to have heard of a single person being drowned in that river, and could not think whether the body would be washed ashore or would sink for days.

Ah, how sweet had existence become! and in one day he had compassed the happiness of a lifetime. It was only a few hours ago that Lewis was sailing past Deerchase so gaily, and Sylvia's soft hair had been so lately blown in his face by summer breezes. Presently in the midst of the darkness and the wildness he again heard a cry; he recognised Lewis's voice, faint as it was, and almost drowned by the clamour of the winds and the waves. Skelton then felt a presentiment that Lewis would be saved, although he himself would undoubtedly be lost. And then came the feeling that the mystery of life was to be solved. No matter now about all his thoughts, all his speculations; in one moment he would know more than all the world could teach him about those vast mysteries that subtle men try to fathom. Skelton was too sincere a man and too fearless to change wholly within the few awful moments of suspension between two worlds. One was gone from him already, the other was close at hand. But he had always firmly believed in a Great First Cause, a Supreme Being. This belief took on strangely the likeness of the Christian God, the Father, Friend, the Maker who orders things wisely for His creatures. Instinctively he remembered the proverb of the poor peasants:

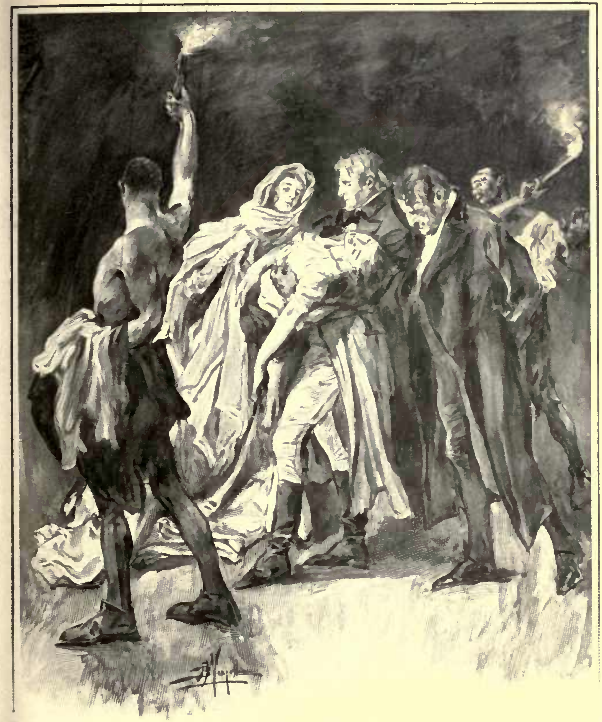
"The good God builds the blind bird's nest."

"If there be such a God," Skelton said to himself, "I adore Him." The next moment he felt himself struggling in the water, with blackness around him and above him, and the wind roaring, and a weight of water like a million tons fell upon him, and he knew no more.

Within an hour the tempest had gone down and the clouds were drifting wildly across the pale sky. Occasionally the moon shone fitfully. The banks of the river were patrolled by frightened and excited crowds of negroes, with Bulstrode and Blair and Mr. Conyers and one or two other white persons among them, all engaged in the terrible search for Skelton and Lewis. The wind had suddenly changed to exactly the opposite direction, and the tide was running in with inconceivable rapidity. The black mud of the river bottom near the shore, that had been drained of water, was now quickly covered. Lights were moving along the shore, boats were being rowed about the river, and cries resounded, those asking for information that the others could not give. Sylvia Shapleigh had spent most of the time on the wharf where Skelton had left her. The servants had got around her, begging her to go to the house, out of the storm. Like a person in a dream, she went and changed her dress, and watched with dazed eyes the fury of sky and air and water. She could not wait for the watchers on the shore to tell her what was going on upon the river, and went back obstinately to the wharf, in spite of the prayers and entreaties of the servants. She tried to persuade herself that she was watching for Skelton's return, but in her inmost heart she felt she would never see him alive again.

It was about nine o'clock when she heard a shout some distance down the river, and a boat pulled up, through the ghostly light, towards Deerchase. Sylvia started in feverish haste towards the bridge. She ran in her eagerness. As she reached the farther end, just at the Deerchase lawn, she met Conyers coming towards her.

"It is Lewis—Lewis is alive!" he said. "He



"It is Lewis—Lewis is alive!" he said. "He is exhausted, but will recover."—*Page 322*

tied the tiller rope around him—that was what saved him. He is exhausted, but he will recover. The boat was found drifting about just below Lone Point."

Sylvia tried to ask, "Has anything been heard of Mr. Skelton?" but she could not. Conyers understood the dumb question in her eyes, and shook his head. Poor, poor Sylvia!

Sylvia, scarcely knowing what she did, walked by Conyers's side across the Deerchase lawn. They met a crowd—Blair carrying Lewis in his arms, and Bulstrode trudging along weeping, and the negroes following. Lewis's face was purplish, and he seemed scarcely to breathe; but when Bob Skinny came running out of the house with a bottle of brandy, and they poured some down his throat, he opened his eyes and managed to gasp, "Where is Mr. Skelton?"

Nobody answered him. Lewis gulped down more brandy, and cried out in a weak, distressed voice:

"I saw Mr. Skelton put off in the boat for me, and I was so afraid for him—"

His head fell over; he could not finish what he was saying.

Blair and Bulstrode took the boy in the house and put him to bed and worked with him; but Sylvia could not leave the shore, and Conyers stayed with her and Bob Skinny, down whose ashy face a constant stream of tears poured. Conyers tried to encourage Sylvia—the search was still going on, up and down the river—but she looked at him with calm, despairing eyes.

An hour before midnight a boat was seen coming up the river from Lone Point. Almost immediately the distant cries, the commotion along the shore ceased. It was the first boat that had returned, except the one that brought Lewis. The negroes all gathered in crowds at the Deerchase landing. Sylvia and Conyers stood on the little pier. The moon was at the full by that time, and although the water was still dark and troubled, the silver disc shone with pale serenity, and the stars glittered in the midnight sky. Conyers, although used to sights of human suffering, turned his face away from Sylvia's pallid anguish. When the boat struck the steps that led down from the wharf, the negroes suddenly uttered their weird shrieks of lamentation. Skelton's body was being lifted out.

Sylvia advanced a step, and the bearers laid their burden down before her. One side of his face was much discoloured, and one arm hung down, where it had been wrenched out of its socket. Conyers tore open the coat and placed his hand upon Skelton's heart. There was not the slightest flutter. The discoloured face was set—he had been dead some little time. Sylvia neither wept nor lamented. Her terrible calmness made Conyers's blood run chill.

"Carry him to the house," she said, after a moment, in which she had leaned down and touched his cold forehead. "He is quite dead. It is not worth while to send for a doctor. See, this terrible blow upon the head stunned him—perhaps killed him. I never saw a dead person before, but I tell you there is nothing to be done for him."

The negroes took him up and carried him tenderly, Bob Skinny holding the poor dislocated arm in place, and everybody wept except Sylvia. Skelton had been a good master, and the horror of his death worked upon the quick sympathies of the negroes. Sylvia walked blindly after them, not knowing where she was going, and not caring. The house was lighted up, as the house servants had been alarmed in the beginning of the storm. The body was carried in the house and laid down in the hall; and Bulstrode, coming down the broad stairs and looking at what once was Richard Skelton, turned pale and almost fainted.

Then there was an awful moment of uncertainty. What was to be done? Bulstrode was clearly unable to give directions or to do anything. Blair was working with Lewis upstairs, and, besides, there was something too frightfully incongruous in applying to him. Conyers, his heart breaking for Sylvia, dared not leave her, and there was nobody to do for the master of the house. Then Bob Skinny, the most useless, the vainest, the least dependable of creatures, suddenly came to the fore. He had loved Skelton with blind devotion, and he had been the person who was with Skelton the most of any one in the world.

"I kin see 'bout Mr. Skelton," he said, trembling. "Me and Sam Trotter, an' dese here house niggers kin do fer him."

Bulstrode, on coming to himself, actually ran out of the house to escape that terrible Presence that had just made its majestic self known. Sylvia, on the contrary, could not be forced away until she had at least seen Skelton once more. Conyers sat by her in one of the great drawing-rooms, awed at her perfectly silent and tearless grief. A few candles made the darkness visible. The room was one that was never used except upon some festive occasion, and the contrast of Sylvia sitting in mute despair in the gala room was a ghastly epitome of life and death. Overhead was audible occasionally the muffled sound of the watchers moving about Lewis Pryor's bed; and across the hall, on the other side, could be heard distinctly in the midnight stillness the gruesome preparations that His Majesty Death requires. Conyers was as silent as Sylvia. His emotions were always insoluble in speech, and now they froze the words upon his tongue. As soon as that one last look at Skelton was had Sylvia must leave the house.

After waiting as much as an hour, a step was heard crossing the hall, and Bob Skinny, with a candle in his hand, opened the door noiselessly and beckoned to Conyers.

Sylvia rose too. She knew what that gesture meant. She walked firmly forward a few steps, and then stopped, trembling; but, with a supreme effort, she went upon her way, Conyers close at hand but not touching her. She felt herself to be in a dream as she crossed the familiar hall and entered the library, which was peculiarly Skelton's room. She turned and closed the door after her, which Conyers had left partly open. The great room was dimly lighted, but the light scarcely penetrated the deep darkness of the corners, and the ceiling was lost in gloom. A window was open, and through it came softly a faint, chill, odoriferous wind. Sylvia remembered Skelton once telling her that in the East such a wind was called the Wind of Death. The heavy curtains moved gently, as if touched by a ghostly hand, and a branch of white hydrangeas, with which the fireplace was filled, trembled at it. On the sofa lay Skelton, looking the least deathlike object in the room. He was dressed in his ordinary evening clothes, and on his delicate high-arched feet were black silk stockings and pumps with diamond buckles. He lay on his side quite naturally, his dislocated arm drawn up under the discoloured side of his face, so that both injuries were quite concealed. Anything more natural or graceful could not be conceived. He seemed to have thrown himself on the lounge after dinner, and have dropped asleep for a few moments.

It was the first dead person Sylvia had ever seen, and at first that natural human horror of the dead quite overcame her. She covered her face and fell on a chair, and presently looked fearfully around her, and everything was terrifying until she saw Skelton. All at once horror of him was banished. She was no more afraid than if he had been lying before her asleep.

She went up to him, and knelt by him fondly. She smoothed the black hair off the pale forehead with a sweet sense of familiarity. She had felt constrained by a maiden diffidence from any of those caresses that a woman sometimes bestows on the man she loves. She never remembered having touched his hair before until that very afternoon, when he had made that remark about his grey hairs. Yes, there were plenty. She passed the locks through her fingers—it was soft and rich, although beginning to lose its perfect blackness. She examined his face carefully; it was so clear cut—she had never seen a mouth and chin and nose more delicately and finely outlined.

"He is not really handsome," she said to herself, looking at him with ineffable tenderness; "but people had eyes for nobody else when he was before them. And how strangely young he looks! and so like Lewis!" For the wonderful youthfulness which death sometimes restores to the human countenance made Skelton and Lewis most extraordinarily alike at that moment.

"And how happy we should have been!" she continued, half aloud. "I meant to have made him love me more through that boy. I took very meekly the love he gave me, because I knew the time would come when it would be all mine—all—all. It came at the very moment that we were forever parted."

Sylvia bent down to kiss the cold face, and suddenly drew back, blushing redly, and looking about to see if she was watched—it had so entirely escaped her that this was not Skelton. She put her warm young arms around his neck, and kissed him a dozen times, when in a moment the coldness, the horrible insensibility before her penetrated her heart. She darted up and ran wildly to the door, almost knocking Conyers over, who was just about to enter. She seized his hand, and, trembling violently, cried out:

"I was just a moment ago in love with a corpse—with a dead man, who could not open his eyes or feel or hear anything; and was it not most unnatural and horrible? Pray, let us go—"

Conyers caught her cold hands in his, and the words he was about to speak died on his lips, so much did Sylvia's face appal him. She flew out of the house, across the lawn, and was almost at the bridge before Conyers caught up with her.

"You will kill yourself," he said breathlessly, but Sylvia only sped on.

There had been no sleep at Belfield that night. A messenger had been sent to Mr. and Mrs. Shapleigh, but they could not get home before morning. As Sylvia rushed into the house as if pursued, Conyers said:

"Let me send for Mrs. Blair."

"No, I will be alone," answered Sylvia.

"God will be with you," said Conyers.

"Yes," replied Sylvia, walking about the dimly lighted hall, "God will be with me. I have had a great many doubts, as you know. I asked—" She stopped in her restless walk and tried to speak Skelton's name, but could not. She continued: "He always put me off gently. He told me those people were best off who could believe in God, the Father of us all; that it was very simple, but simple things were usually the best. He told me I might read a great deal—my mind was very eager on the subject—but that those who claim God is not proved cannot themselves prove he is not. And I can even believe in the goodness of God now, for, at the very moment that I was to lose—" She still could not speak Skelton's name, and indicated it by a pause—"I had one moment of rapture that was worth a lifetime of pain. I found out that *he* loved me better than he had ever loved anything on earth. Nothing can ever rob me of that moment. I shall carry it through this world and into the next, where there is a glorious possibility that we may meet again."

She turned, and went quietly and noiselessly up the broad, winding stair. She looked like a white shadow in the gloomy half-light. About midway the stair, her form, that to Conyers, watching her, had grown dimmer at every step, melted softly into the darkness.

Conyers turned and left the house.

When he reached Deerchase again everything was solemnly quiet. In a corner of the hall Bulstrode was sitting by the round table, with a lamp on it, leaning his head upon his hands. Lewis was sleeping up-stairs, and Blair was watching him. Conyers, ever mindful of others, sent the servants off to bed and closed the house. He would be the watcher for the rest of the night. It was then about two o'clock in the morning. Conyers went into the library and looked long and fearlessly at that which lay so peacefully on the sofa. Death had no terrors for him. He believed the human soul worth everything in the world, but the body, living or dead, mattered but little.

On the table lay a riding glove of Skelton's, still retaining the shape of the fingers. Scraps of his writing were about—two letters, sealed and addressed—a book with the paper knife still lying between its uncut leaves. Conyers, calm and almost stoical, looked at it all, and then, going into the hall, sat down at the table where Bulstrode was, and, opening a small Bible in his pocket, began to read the Gospel of St. Matthew. The light from the lamp fell upon his stern features, that to the ordinary eye were commonplace enough, but to the keener one were full of spirituality. He was half educated, but wholly good. He wandered and blundered miserably, but faith and goodness dwelt within him.

After a while Bulstrode spoke, his rich voice giving emphasis to his earnest words:

"Conyers, I would give all I know for the peace you enjoy."

"Peace!" said poor Conyers, raising his sombre eyes to Bulstrode's. "I have no peace. It is all warfare."

"But with the warfare you have peace, and you have no fear of—*It*"—Bulstrode shuddered, and pointed toward the library door, which was slightly ajar—"nor even of death, which has turned Skelton to *It* in one moment of time."

"I certainly have no fear," answered Conyers, after a pause. "I doubt, I am at war, I suffer agonies of mind, but not once have I ever feared death. I fear life much more."

Bulstrode said nothing for a moment, then disappeared, his shuffling step sounding with awful distinctness through the silent house. He came back after a little while. The fumes of brandy were strong upon him, and in his hand he carried two or three volumes.

"Here," said he, laying the books down carefully, "here is what I read when all the mysterious fears of human nature beset and appal me—Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. They are the only two philosophers who agree, after all. Old Aristotle went to work and built the most beautiful and perfect bridge, that ever entered into the mind of man to conceive, a part of the way across the river that separates the known from the unknown. He got a solid foundation for every stone of that bridge; every step is safe; nothing can wash it away. But he reached a point where he could not see any farther. Mists obscured it all. If any man that ever lived could have carried this bridge all the way over in its beauty and perfection, Aristotle was that man; but having carried it farther than it had ever been carried before, he said: 'Here reason stops. Man can do no more. The Great First Principle must now reveal the rest.' Observe: All the others claim to have done a complete work. Kant built a great raft that floated about and kept men from drowning, but it is not a plain pathway on a bridge; it cannot connect the two shores; nobody can get from the known to the unknown on it. Hegel built two or three beautiful arches and called it complete, but it stopped far short of Aristotle's, and led nowhere. Then there were dozens of other fellows, wading around in the shallows and paddling aimlessly about the river, and all crying out: 'Here is the way; this is the ferry to cross. There is no way but mine, and my way is the only perfect way. There is no more to know except what I can tell you.' But Aristotle, who is the embodied Mind, said there was more to come; he saw beyond him the wavering line of the other shore; but where he stood was all mist and darkness. He knew—ah, the wise old Greek!—knew his work stopped short, and he knew it could be carried to the end. He was so great, therefore, that no imperfections could escape him; and he did not mistake his splendid fragment for the whole.

And he knew a part so splendid must be a part of the whole. He saw, as it were, the open door, but he could not enter; he had heard the overture played, but he could not remain to see the curtain rise. But fourteen hundred years after Aristotle had done all that mortal man could do towards solving the great problems of being, came the man who was to take up the work with the same tools, the same method, that Aristotle had left off. Ah! that magnificent old heathen knew that it was to come. But why do I call him a heathen? Zounds, Conyers, if any man ever gave a leg to revealed religion, it was Aristotle!"

Conyers was listening attentively. Bulstrode's manner was grotesque, but his earnestness was extreme and moving.

He picked up one of his books and caressed it.

"This other man was Thomas Aquinas. I can't help believing these two men to be now together in some happy region—perhaps in a garden—walking up and down, and in communion together. I daresay the Greek was a lean, eagle-eyed man, like '*It*' in yonder—" Bulstrode looked over his shoulder at the library door—"and Thomas was a great, lumbering, awkward, silent creature. His fellow-students called him the 'Dumb Ox,' but his master said, 'One day the bellowing of this ox shall shake the world.' He was on the other side of the river, and he saw the beautiful bridge more than half way across, and he went to work boldly to build up to it. There were so many mists and shadows, that things on Aristotle's side had huge, uncanny, misshapen figures to those on the opposite side. And there were quicksands, too, and sometimes it was hard to find a bottom. But this Thomas Aquinas found it, and behold! Magnificent arches spanning the mysterious river—a clear pathway forever from one side to the other, from the known to the unknown, from philosophy to the revealed religion."

All the time he had been speaking Conyers's melancholy eyes, which had been fixed on him, gradually lightened, and when Bulstrode stopped they were glowing.

"It is of comfort to me to hear you say that," he said.

"So it was to Meno when Aristotle said he believed in the immortality of the soul. Meno said, 'I like what you are saying'; and the Greek answered pleasantly—ah, he was a pleasant fellow, this wise Aristotle—'I, too, like what I am saying. Some things I have said of which I am not altogether confident; but that we shall be better and braver and less helpless if we think we ought to inquire, than we should have been if we had indulged the idle fancy that there was no use in seeking to know what we do not know, that is a theme upon which I am ready to fight in word and deed to the utmost of my power.'"

"But Aristotle acknowledges there were some things he said about the great question of which he was not 'confident.'"

"Yes, yes," replied Bulstrode impatiently. "There are two voices in every soul—one doubting and dreading, the other believing and loving. You see, the other fellows—Hegel and the rest of the crew—are perfectly cocksure; they are certain of everything.

But old Aristotle saw that something in the way of proof was wanting, and that great, silent Thomas Aquinas supplied the rest—that is, if there is anything in Aristotle's method of reasoning."

"Then why are you not a follower of Thomas Aquinas into the revealed religion?" asked Conyers.

Bulstrode was silent a moment, sighing heavily.

"Because—because—Thomas Aquinas leads me inevitably into the field of morals. You see, all rational religions are deuced moral, and that's what keeps me away from 'em. I tell you, Conyers, that if you had led such a life as I have, you'd be glad enough to think that it was all over when the blood stopped circulating and the breath ceased. My awful doubt is, that it's all *true*—that it doesn't stop; that not only life goes on forever, but that the terribly hard rules laid down by that peasant in Galilee are, after all, the code for humanity, and then—great God! what is to become of us?"

Bulstrode stopped again and wiped his brow.

"You see," he continued, in some agitation, after a moment, "you want it to be true—you dread that it can't be true—you are tormented with doubts and harassed with questions. *I* don't want it to be true. I believe with Aristotle that there is a Great First Principle. I can be convinced by my reason of that; and I think there is overwhelming presumptive proof of the immortality of the soul; but then—there may be more, there may be more. The Jewish carpenter, with that wonderful code of morals, may be right, after all, and I am sincerely afraid of it; and if I went all the way of the road with Thomas Aquinas, I should reach, perhaps, a terrible certainty. Talk about Wat Bulstrode being pure of heart, and keeping himself unspotted from the world, and loving them who do him evil—and the whole code in its awful beauty—why, if that be true, then I am the most miserable man alive! Sometimes I tell myself, if that code were lived up to the social system would go to pieces; and then it occurs to me, that ideal was made purposely so divine that there was not the slightest danger of the poor human creature ever reaching it, in this place of wrath and tears; that the most he can do is to reach towards it, and *that* lifts him immeasurably. But that very impossible perfection, like everything else about it, is unique, solitary, creative. All other codes of morals are possible—all lawgivers appoint a limit to human patience, forbearance; but this strange code does not. And that's why I say I am afraid—I'm afraid it's true."

Conyers sat looking—looking straight before him. He feared it was not true, and Bulstrode feared it was true; and he asked himself if anything more indicative of the vast gulf between two beings of the same species could be conceived.

Bulstrode began again. His head was sunk on his breast, and he seemed to fall into the deepest dejection.

"And you've got good fighting ground. I realise that every time I try in my own mind to fight this Dumb Ox." He laid his great hand on one of the volumes before him. "There is that tremendous argument of cause and effect. All the other founders of religions—I mean the real religions, not the fanciful mythologies—were great men. Buddha and Mohammed would have been great men had they never broached the subject of religion ; and they had a lifetime to work in. And then comes this Jewish carpenter, and he does nothing—absolutely nothing—except preach for a little while in the most obscure corner of the Roman Empire, and is executed for some shadowy offence against the ecclesiastical law, and behold! his name is better known than the greatest conqueror, the wisest philosopher that ever lived. Where one man knows of Aristotle, a thousand know of him. Now, how could such an enormous effect come from such a trifling cause? Who was this carpenter, with his new doctrine of democracy—socialism, if you will—the rights of the masses; and the masses didn't know they had any rights until then!

"Most of you half-taught fellows find your arguments in the code of morals; but although, as I see, the code is ideally far superior to any other, yet all are good; there were good morals taught ever since man came upon the earth, for good morals means ordinary common sense.

"But this religion of the carpenter is peculiar. It does for thinkers, and for the innumerable multitudes of the ages that don't think and can't think. It's wonderful, and it may be true. And, Conyers, if I were a good man, instead of a worthless dog, I would not give up the belief for all the kingdoms of the earth."

Bulstrode got up then and went away again.

Conyers sat, turning over in his mind the curious circumstance that all of his so-called theological training that was meant to convince him of the truths of religion was so badly stated, so confusedly reasoned, that it opened the way to a fiendish company of doubts; while Bulstrode, who frankly declared his wish that there might be no future life, helped, by his very fears, to make Conyers a better Christian than before.

When Bulstrode returned, the odour of brandy was stronger than ever; he went to the brandy bottle for fortitude as naturally as Conyers went to his Bible.

But his eye was brighter, his gait was less slouching, and a new courage seemed to possess him.

Before this he had turned his back to the library door, and in his two expeditions after consolation Conyers noticed that he had walked as far away from that door as possible. But now he boldly went towards the library, and went in and stayed a considerable time.

When he returned he sat down trembling, and his eyes filled with tears.

"I have been to see *It*. What a strange thing was *It* when *It* was alive, five hours ago! How has *It* fared since? How fares *It* now? How far has *It* travelled in those five hours? Or is *It* near at hand? When *It* was living—when *It* was Skelton—he was the most interesting man I ever knew. He had tremendous natural powers, and, had not fortune been too kind to him, he would have been known to the whole world by this time. He was weighted down with money; it was an octopus to him; it enabled him to do everything he ought not to have done, and it kept him from doing everything he ought to have done. It gave him a library that swamped him; it enabled him to hire other men to think for him, when he could have thought much better for himself; it put it in his power to follow his enemies relentlessly, and to punish them remorselessly. Ah, Conyers, old Aristotle himself said, 'And rich in a high degree, and good in a high degree, a man cannot be.' What a great good it is that few of us can spare the time, the thought, the money, for our revenges like Skelton! Most of us can only utter a curse and go about our business, but Skelton could pursue his revenge like a game of skill. Fate, however, defeats us all. Let man go his way; Fate undoes all the web he weaves so laboriously. Skelton spent twenty years trying to ruin Blair, and I believe he saved him. Nothing but some terrible catastrophe such as Skelton brought about would ever have cured Blair of that frenzy for the turf.

"But everything with Skelton went according to the rule of contrary. Did you ever know before of a rich man who was disinterestedly loved? Yet, I tell you, that English girl that married him could have married a coronet. His money was a mere bagatelle to hers, and I believe as truly as I live that Skelton was disinterested in marrying that huge fortune.

"And Sylvia Shapleigh—ah, that poor, pretty Sylvia!—she will never be merry any more; and you and I will never see those green-grey eyes of hers sparkle under her long lashes again. She was the most desperately in love with Skelton of any creature I ever saw. She didn't mind the boy—she knew all about Lewis—she didn't mind anything; she loved this rich man not for his money, but for himself. Did you ever hear of such a queer thing on this ridiculous old planet before? And Lewis—the boy of whom Skelton was at first ashamed—how proud he became of him! and how he craved that boy's love! And nobody ever held out so long against Skelton as that black-eyed boy, the living image of him, his son from the crown of his head to the sole of the foot.

"But at last Skelton won Lewis over; he won Sylvia Shapleigh; he won the power to work; he won everything; only this day he won the battle over himself; he was generous to Blair, and then in the midst of it comes Death, the great jester, and says, 'Mount behind me; leave all unfinished.' And Skelton went. The little spark of soul went, that is, and left behind the mass of the body it dragged around after it."

Bulstrode paused again, and Conyers, opening the Bible, read some of the promises out of the Gospel of Matthew. Bulstrode listened attentively.

"Read that part where it commands the forgiveness of enemies," he said.

Conyers read them, his voice, although low, echoing solemnly through the great, high-pitched hall. Bulstrode covered his face with his hands, and then, rising suddenly, went a second time to the library. He came back in a few moments. His coarse face was pale, his eyes dimmed.

"I have forgiven him—I have forgiven Skelton," he said. "He was not good to me, although he was a thousand, thousand times better to me than I was to myself; but I have forgiven him all I had against him. The dead are so meek; even the proud Skelton looks meek in death. And I tell you, he was a man all but great—all but good."

The lamp was burning low; there was a faint flutter of sparrows' wings under the eaves; a wind, fresh and soft, rustled among the climbing roses that clung to the outer wall; a blackbird burst suddenly into his homely song, as if bewitched with the ecstasy of the morning. The pale grey light that penetrated the chinks and crannies of the hall changed as if by magic to a rosy colour. The day was at hand. Conyers closed his Bible, and said, with solemn joy, to Bulstrode:

"And so you fear all this is true? What ineffable comfort it gives me! A man of your learning and—"

"Learning!" cried Bulstrode, throwing himself back in his chair. "Look at *It* in yonder! *It* was learned; *I* am learned; but all of us can only cry, as the Breton mariners do when they put to sea: "Lord, have mercy upon us! for our boat is so small, and Thy ocean is so black and so wide!"

"Amen!" said Conyers, after a moment.

THE END.

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